

The Pathetic Snobs

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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The Pathetic Snobs

*Being certain Happenings in the Second
Year of the War in the Lives of very
:: :: Ordinary People :: ::*

*By Dolf Wyllarde, Author of "Mafoota,"
"As ye Have Sown," &c. :: :: :: ::*



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THE PATHETIC SNOBS

CHAPTER I

"While each day we saw
The 'perfect lady' skilled in what to do
And what to say, grace in each tone and act
('Tis taught in schools, but needs some native tact),
Yet narrow in her mind as in her shoe."

E. WHEELER WILCOX.

"TWO of Anstey's, please!"

"A stick o' chocolate!"

"Cup of tea and one of those puffs!"

"Two Woodbines and a box of matches—haven't you got a small box?"

"Sweets!"

The ladies behind the long counter were running to and fro like distracted hens, snatching at the piles of cigarettes on the shelves and frequently getting Gold-flake instead of Anstey's, and Spearmint for chocolate, in their hurry. The other side of the counter the room was rapidly filling, and the soldiers were pressing in to have their wants supplied before settling down to the tables, or drifting over to the piano where an ex-commercial traveller was playing scraps of *Carmen* with a touch that Pachmann might have approved. At the Post-Office old Miss Noble was

serving stamps and picture postcards and Y.M.C.A. note-paper as fast as her hands would let her. Miss Noble was always allotted the Post-Office because there was no running backwards and forwards, and she was lame ; but Miss Johns and Mrs. Thornhill and Miss Templeton were beginning to be tired with standing and dizzy with the heat and the orders.

“ I do think it's too bad of the six o'clock shift to be late ! ” said Mrs. Thornhill, as she supplied a very youthful warrior with toffee. “ I asked them specially to come on time. And the carriage has been waiting for you this half-hour, Primrose dear ! ”

Miss Primrose Day Templeton was the youngest of the group, a slender young lady of twenty-odd years, dressed with a simplicity that was almost ostentatious ; but it was noticeable that the older women treated her with a consideration they hardly accorded themselves. One cannot describe Primrose as a mere girl, because she was always and at all times the young lady, and the treatment she received only accentuated the fact a little. Had Mrs. Thornhill not been present Primrose could not have been there either ; even though she was doing War-work in serving the soldiers at the Wessex Hut, she was heavily chaperoned, and Lady Gracia had sent the carriage for her safe conduct home. Mrs. Thornhill was the Vicar's wife, and allowed the privilege of chaperoning the daughter of General and Lady Gracia Templeton on these occasions ; and she really felt it a privilege, and that it placed her on a different level to Miss Johns, who lived in a detached villa in a modest fashion, or to Miss Noble, who lived still lower down the social scale and only inhabited furnished rooms. But then there were no pretences about Miss Noble.

She had been a governess, and was no doubt only too thankful to have retired from her labours into furnished rooms, though of the humblest type. Miss Johns, on the other hand, had some claims to gentility owing to her detached villa and her two maids, though it was understood that her means were very narrow. She certainly had some aspirations towards that sphere of life to which it had not pleased God to call her, and Mrs. Thornhill used to watch her little advances to Miss Templeton with a jealous eye.

"I am afraid you will be late for your dinner," she said to the girl, as the clock drew round to seven.

"It does not matter," said Primrose civilly. "We do not dine till eight, and Mamma knows where I am."

"Ah, of course! I was forgetting that most people dine at eight—I am still unfashionable enough to prefer half-past seven," said Miss Johns, as she hooked down a tin of "brasso" for a soldier who seemed to take some pride in his buttons. As a matter of fact, her own evening meal was supper, and not infrequently consisted of a fresh herring and bread and jam; but it sounded better to call it dinner, and Primrose could not know, though Mrs. Thornhill might suspect. Miss Johns had found out something, at any rate, through her own slip—she knew now that the people at Meary House dined at eight o'clock, and upon the first opportunity she would say to her neighbours: "Oh, that does not matter, because I know that the General and Lady Gracia always dine at eight!" It is such small discoveries that make the incidents in some of our lives.

Primrose was not really thinking much of what she was doing or saying at the moment when Miss Johns spoke to her. She was paying more attention than

she intended or herself thought fit to the figure of a man leaning against the counter further down and watching the soldiers. He was not in uniform, though his arm was in a sling, and so he should not really have been there; but he had just informed Mrs. Thornhill that Mrs. Medlicott had asked him to come, as she wanted him to see the Hut and help at the next concert, and Mrs. Medlicott being on the next shift, he was allowed to stay until her arrival. Primrose knew who he was—she had, indeed, bowed to him in her shyest fashion on his arrival—the latest subaltern gazetted to the 17th Wessex, though still on sick leave owing to his arm. He looked far too old for the one star, but she understood that he had been through the ranks, and only just received his commission. It was, indeed, the training in the O.T.C. that had revealed fresh injury from the shrapnel, and necessitated another slight operation. The Medlicotts said that he was a Canadian, but he did not speak like a Canadian. His name was Gilbert Wise. Primrose found herself looking at him again and again under demure lashes, and wondered what on earth was the matter with her. She was too careful a product of old-fashioned English civilization to find men very interesting, unless they had done something heroic, in which case she was encouraged to an abstract hero-worship. But many women, old and young, looked, openly or covertly, at Mr. Wise, whose good looks were of a type that proves attractive to the opposite sex. He was not really handsome—not so regular-featured or comely as many of the men sitting at the long tables down the long room; but he had long-lashed eyes, much drooping at the corners, and a curious mouth whose curves went up rather

than down, and still more on the left than the right. It was a crooked mouth, and one of his eyebrows followed its line and was crooked also. For the rest, his features were short and straight, the chin very square, and he wore his hair parted in the middle and brushed up as any Tommy might. The whole face was curiously mobile and expressive, however, particularly the eyes, of which he made constant use. Miss Templeton was a little irritated to see that he even made eyes at Mrs. Thornhill when explaining his presence there; but a few minutes later she was amused to find that he was unconsciously making eyes at the pile of clean cups on the counter, apparently for practice, though there was little need. It had become a habit with him.

“ Pipe, please ! ”

“ How much are the pipes ? ” said Miss Johns in a distracted tone to Mrs. Thornhill.

“ I don’t know—I’ll ask Mr. Langley.” She dashed into the little kitchen to inquire of the Superintendent, who was showing his helper how to make malted milk; and a fresh batch of soldiers pouring in to the counter, Primrose perforce moved into her place for the moment. Having supplied them with the “ Soldier’s Friend,” Player’s, throat lozenges, and Eccles cakes, she found herself breathless but for the moment disengaged, looking across the counter at Gilbert Wise, who had kept his place despite the rush.

“ I wonder if I may buy a packet of Woodbines here ? ” he said, with the mechanical glance from his long-lashed eyes that he had bestowed on Mrs. Thornhill and the teacups. He did not really see Miss Templeton at the moment, being absorbed in his sudden nostalgia for cheap tobacco. “ I’ve only been

an officer for a week, and I'm not used to their smokes yet. When you've been smoking Woodbines and shag for eighteen months it spoils your palate."

"I can sell you a packet of Woodbines, of course—two are cheaper than one?" said Primrose suggestively, and unconscious that she voiced the old story of the eggs in "Alice through the Looking-glass."

"It's an indulgence of the flesh," said Wise with a lazy laugh; all his movements seemed a little tired, and she supposed that it was the result of his injured arm. "Do you like smoking, Miss Templeton?"

"Not for girls!" said the young lady primly.

Then he really looked at her, opening his eyes with amused surprise, and saw her for the first time. He had been introduced to her one day last week at the Manor, where he had been lunching with the Medlicotts, and Lady Gracia had brought her daughter over to call, but she had hardly counted amongst the Medlicott girls, who were pleasantly fast and noisy and high-coloured. In such society Primrose had kept quietly near her mother, and had hardly reached the group of which Wise and his brother officers were the centre. He had no recollection of her save as a daughter of the Squire of Meary. Now he saw a small oval face with fair hair, that grew very prettily round the smooth brows, and eyes that were a little misty when they looked at you. It gave her a loving look which was belied by the prim severity of the face in full, and he had the aggravated feeling that he was being censured by a priggish child.

"Of course, I meant for boys," he said as demurely as she had spoken, but with a mockery of which she was evidently aware, for her pale face flushed angrily.

"I think it a bad habit, anyhow," she said stiffly,

as she turned from him to meet the relieving ladies who had come at last.

Wise was instantly claimed by Mrs. Medlicott and her daughters and marched up the room to look at the platform at the further end and judge of the possibilities of sound; but he must have managed to escape before the ladies of the last shift had got away, because as Miss Templeton and Mrs. Thornhill came out of the back of the Hut into the darkness of the barrack Square he was standing at a little distance, by the carriage door, waiting to put them in.

"How dark it is! I ought to have brought my torch," said Primrose, blinking after the strong light of the Hut. "Take care, Mrs. Thornhill. Simmons ought to have driven closer up——"

"Oh, but we can see the carriage lamps quite well! Come this way—I know the Square like my own house. Is that you, Mr. Wise? How good of you—with only one arm to offer us!"

Mrs. Thornhill was a little flustered. Miss Templeton was going to drop her at the Vicarage, and this being driven home in the Squire's carriage always made her talkative, as a good glass of port might have done.

Primrose had started a little as her eyes grew used to the darkness and she recognized the figure by the carriage door. "Please don't trouble!" she said gently, as Wise put his one strong hand under her arm to lift her in. "Good-night, Mr. Wise."

"Good-night, Miss Templeton—thank you for letting me have the Woodbines!" She wondered all the way home if his voice were ironical. It sounded so funny coming out of the darkness—not quite like any man's voice she had ever heard, she thought. Mrs. Thornhill chattered all the way, happy in her

mental port wine and unconscious that Primrose seemed a little silent.

Miss Johns and Miss Noble were going home together, since they lived near by each other, and there was no one to give them a lift. Primrose and Mrs. Thornhill had said "Good-night" to them as they emerged from the Hut, and Miss Johns had added "What a dark night! I hope you won't have any difficulty in finding the carriage." She liked the sound of the word "carriage," and the picture it conjured up in her mind of the roomy warmth and ease, the fur rug over one's knees, the drive over the sloppy winter roads to the great lighted house and dinner at eight o'clock. It was something definite to go on that she knew now that the Templetons dined at eight. Otherwise she relied much on her imagination for the pictures in her mind, since she had never been inside Meary House save for a Sale of Work, and then only into the library.

"I think we had better take each other's arms," said Miss Noble, laughing, as they set off. "Last time I steered straight into the barbed wire coming out of the Square, and was clawed off by two soldiers, or I might have torn myself badly."

"Let us use our lanterns," said Miss Johns nervously, pressing the button of her own and sending a little round spot of light before her that was as misleading as a glow-worm. The two women stumbled over rough places despite the lanterns, and bumped inevitably into the wire before they reached the high road, when with a sigh of relief they turned their faces to the slope of Camp Rise and began to trudge through the mile and a half of mire that lay between them and their homes.

"What a charming girl Primrose Templeton has

grown!" said Miss Johns with the simplest conviction. If anyone had told her that she would not have admired the young lady as a cottager, she would have been greatly puzzled and a little hurt; but, as a matter of fact, she saw Primrose always set in the frame of her house and position, and it distracted her real mind from the picture itself, as a very beautiful old carved frame may distract attention from a dull engraving.

"Is she?" said Miss Noble innocently. "She always strikes me as rather a sad girl—sad without knowing it, perhaps," she added thoughtfully.

"Sad!" said Miss Johns in stupefied surprise. "Oh, do you think she can be? She has everything to make her happy."

"Everything but her bringing up," said Miss Noble bluntly. "She is an only child, and she has been kept a very only child. Lady Gracia's views are old-fashioned, and they have handicapped her daughter for the inevitable day when she must brush shoulders with the world."

"Well, of course you have had more opportunity of studying youth than I," said Miss Johns (she remembered that Miss Noble had been a governess); "but I think she has delightful manners. I like her so much better than those fast Miss Medlicotts!"

"The Medlicotts are not bad girls," said Miss Noble a little obstinately. "They have had too much liberty, perhaps, where Primrose Templeton has had too little."

"There is a shocking story about one of them——"

"I never listen to shocking stories," said Miss Noble serenely. "I'm so sorry to walk slowly up the hill, but my lameness makes me a tiresome companion."

Then Miss Johns' kindness of heart shone out much brighter than her lantern. "I don't mind in the least," she said eagerly. "I was quite glad we were going slowly, for I feel the hill myself. Do please lean on me if it helps you!"

A queer twisted smile crossed Miss Noble's face in the darkness. She was not a pretty old woman to look at, and her eyes were set in a cavernous fashion under hooded brows, but when one reached the eyes themselves they were full of light and very intelligent.

Miss Johns would have been kind, anyway, for it was impossible for her to be otherwise, but to-night she was also happy. She was always happy when she had been at the Hut, not from any great pleasure in her service there, for the soldiers secretly frightened her a little, and she never attempted to get in touch with them or talk to them as Mrs. Thornhill did. But she always felt that she had been in good society by reason of the Vicar's wife and the Squire's daughter; and though her acquaintance with Miss Templeton at least never reached beyond the Hut, it comforted her. "I do like to know nice people!" she thought to herself, and when she said "nice," she did not recognize that what she meant was that they lived in a nice house and had a nice position. Lady Gracia was really beyond reproach, but Miss Johns would have felt a subtle excitement even if it had only been Mrs. Medlicott, or Lady Penndragon, who shared her shift. Both of them ranked as "County" in varying degrees, and visited each other, though it was rumoured that Lady Gracia disapproved so entirely of the Penndragon *ménage* that her calls at Dragonby were purely official. Still, Lady Penndragon and her son Sir Arthur were "County"—you could not get

away from it, and Lady Gracia could not evict them from their position, however graceless they might be. It was a pity that Miss Noble was only an ex-governess, and that Fate decreed that she and Miss Johns should always walk home together, because it was somewhat of a drop from the elation of having associated with Primrose Templeton and her world, though by indirect means. But no doubt Miss Noble was very well educated. Miss Johns always fell back on this in her mind when thinking of Miss Noble, for she was very gently charitable. When they came to her own gate she insisted on going a little further on to Miss Noble's, that the older woman might have the support of her arm, and saw her safely on to her own doorstep before she walked back home.

"My feet are quite wet, trudging all this way," she thought, as she carefully scraped them on her own clean doorstep. "But I am glad I went—I always enjoy my afternoon at the Hut! It is quite a little change—one sees different people. I really don't think I shall change for dinner to-night, I am so late. I will tell Minnie to bring it straight up." And as it was only cold tongue it really did not matter.

Miss Noble brewed a cup of tea for herself over the gas-stove in her sitting-room, and shared the milk with her landlady's cat. She did not call her nondescript meal anything, but when it came in on a tray she gave a sigh of content and put her feet up on the fender.

"It's a dark, wet night, puss," she said. "How thankful we ought to be for the roof over our heads and our own little corner to live in! Come and eat bread and butter and anchovy paste; it's all I've got to offer you to-night."

CHAPTER II

" If she had—Well ! She longed, and knew not wherefore.
Had the world nothing she might live to care for ?
No second self to say her evening prayer for ? "

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES.

MISS BERTHA JOHNS was a lady of a certain age. Its possibilities extended between the limits of forty and fifty, and quite possibly reached beyond, but her hair, though somewhat dull brown, was not grey, and her figure enabled her to dress as younger women do in a coat and skirt and a silk shirt in the mornings, which was transformed into a blouse in the afternoons—on days when anyone came to tea it was *crêpe de chine*, but on solitary occasions it was *delaine*. She wore the same skirt from motives of economy. When she went out to play bridge in the evening, however, she put on a black gown with transparent sleeves and some old lace about it that looked like cobwebs. The transparent sleeves always made her very chilly, but it was on these occasions that she looked suddenly and unexpectedly charming. No one ever quite knew how it happened, certainly not Miss Johns herself. But she was one of those people whose whole appearance seems to take some subtle flavour from the tone of their clothes. Dress

Miss Johns in a delaine blouse and a cloth skirt, and she was an ordinary woman making her small income go as far as it might, and sensible of her restricted position—one saw it in her face; dress her in soft rich silks and cobwebs of fine lace, and all the gracious possibilities in her lent her a delicate flavour of what in Victorian days might be called “high life.” Perhaps if her circumstances had been different she would have had a romantic reputation, she might almost have been a beautiful woman.

For she was only the daughter of a provincial doctor, and life as she had experienced it had been puny owing to narrow ways and means. She had lived in a fairly large house in a country town during her father’s lifetime, and had known his patients who were the townspeople, and had yearned for something better. By which it need not be supposed that the exchange which Miss Johns desired would really have been better in itself, but simply that she was looking up to the ideal as she conceived it. All snobbishness comes to that. We struggle upward, grade above grade, pretending to ourselves and our neighbours that we are received in higher circles than we merit, until let us hope that some day we may become ambitious of knowing the angels. The pathos of the thing lies in the fact that our present ideals are frequently mistaken, but despite that it is better to look up than down. The man in danger is he who is perfectly satisfied with his position, and only looks to better it materially. Of such are the ranks of diners-out, who would eat with Judas so long as he held the bag, and the human parasites who breed upon the diseases of civilization.

When the doctor died, he left Miss Johns between

two and three hundred a year and some old-fashioned furniture. She could not afford to keep up the large house in the town, and it would have been another social drop to take a smaller one in a row of villas, each labelled like the other. But out in the country rents were cheaper, and Miss Johns did not mind her reduced circumstances so much. She felt that there was something rather superior in living "right out," as the tradespeople said, rather than on the outskirts of the town, and she was nearer to the great country houses, which the County called "places." Though she might never know the families who lived in them, she knew all about them, and in some cases she knew rather more than there was to know; but that mattered very little. It gave her something to think about, and to take an interest in, and, above all, to set up as a standard. Not the least evil of Socialism would be that it would give us no upper class to envy and to imitate in a totally mistaken and ridiculous manner. When Miss Johns put a square of pale-pink satin in the middle of her table-cloth, and thought that Lord and Lady Wessex used the same thing, she gave herself the impression of elegance that she imagined she had copied from Wessex Castle. (Lady Wessex had never had a "centre cloth" on her dinner table, and speculated as to the uses of these fearful and wonderful things in shops. It is probable that she had never even seen one used in her friends' houses.) She was very particular about using the pale-pink satin, even though her "late dinner" might consist of one fresh herring and bread and jam, and she would no more have sat down without it than tolerated dirty knives or unpolished glass. Except when she came in jaded from the work at the Hut

and serving round-faced youths with "fags," she always changed her blouse for supper, and insisted on the centre-cloth—for which her maids ridiculed her, and respected her in their hearts. She always had two maids, very young girls, who had never been in service before, and who tyrannized over her and went their own evil way, but always emerged from the situation at Trevena with better manners, and something gentler and finer about them when they ungraciously left their first mistress for a larger establishment. As it was certainly not Miss Johns' training (she never trained anything except the Gloire-de-Dijon rose over the artificial rustic arch), it must have been the unconscious influence and example that emanated from her insignificant existence; but of that she knew nothing. The example resulted in the imitation that is the sincerest flattery, and when Minnie married her young man she meant to have a centre-cloth too, for great occasions; but it was, after all, only the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace that asked for the beauties of life. Had Miss Johns lived in furnished rooms like Miss Noble, or had only one servant, she might have afforded herself many small luxuries, and had more change of air, for, to tell the truth, she was a little overweighted with her tiny house and its appointments; but she could not have borne to live in rooms, and to have her letters arrive at 3, Laburnum Villas, instead of Trevena. It might be a more suitable housing for her income,—“But then, what an address!” said Miss Johns. She had taken Trevena partly on account of the address—Miss Johns, Trevena, The Camp Rise, sounded so select, even to those who knew that it was only a detached villa standing in a

square of garden not big enough to grow its own vegetables and sustain its front lawn with the flower-beds.

With the exception of the Vicar's wife, who had to call on everybody, the residents on the Camp Rise had not accepted Miss Johns for two years after she settled in Trevena, and then they never forgot that she was only a provincial doctor's daughter, and that they were mostly retired Service people. It is true that they did not own "Places" like the County set did, and that they lived in houses which resembled Trevena on an enlarged scale; but the grades of the professional class are as innumerable as the castes of the Brahmin and as narrowly divided. If she had not been such a staunch Churchwoman, I think Miss Johns might have died of the chill of her social world in the first years of transplantation; but there is no institution so respectable as the Church of England, and none that opens the doors of a neighbourhood so infallibly. This is not due to charity so much as to fashion. To be Church of England implies a certain social standing as much as to be Chapel puts one, somehow, a little further down the scale. Miss Johns, however, went to Church because she liked it, and was firmly convinced that monotonous repetitions in an ill-ventilated building did everybody good so long as it was a Church service in a church. The mere going into its damp or stuffy atmosphere and sitting in a pew in her best hat made her feel that her state of being had improved, and the horrors of ecclesiastical architecture affected her not at all so long as they were consecrated by a Bishop. If she could have walked from the little squat structure at Causeway, which was her nearest place of worship, straight into

the Alabaster Mosque at Cairo, she would have felt the atmosphere of the former far more religious than all the vast loveliness of the Mohammedan place of worship, and would have been inwardly convinced that God was not to be found in the place unblessed by lawn sleeves. But her virtue was its own reward. The neighbourhood of the Camp Rise approved of Miss Johns' devotion to the Church, her subscriptions to parochial funds—contributed with real self-denial—and her untiring labours at Sunday school and Bible class. It began to thaw, and invited her to play bridge—when there was nobody available a little higher in the social scale, and a fourth was very badly needed to make up a table. Miss Johns went, trembling with excitement, and with the elusive charm of her evening clothes. She always felt, when she came back to her little house, that she had inhabited another sphere ; but it was really the influence of her own appearance and the magic of success that was upon her.

Since the War there had been fewer bridge-parties in the evening, because the barracks at Camp were full to overflowing, and a rough class of men walked the roads, and were liable to say " Good-night ! " to the bridge players as they walked home. There was something very awful in this " Good-night ! " coming out of the dark in a masculine voice that certainly did not belong to an acquaintance. It suggested the license of the Military, who were now the most important people in England, a possible advance if one responded, and a lack of that reserve that forbids English people to be civil without at least a knowledge of each other's names. Miss Noble, it is true, had been heard to reply " Good-night ! " also in her

pleasant old voice, and to go calmly on her way ; but then, she was so well educated ! It seemed somehow to protect her that she had once been a governess and in charge of younger women.

But bridge was still played on Camp Rise, in the afternoons, when there was no Hut duty, or Mission meeting, or calls that must be paid at the Vicarage to receive one's parochial orders. The parties met at half-past three, and played for an hour and then had some tea, and went home by daylight, except those inveterate gamblers who braved the dusk for another rubber, and the " Good evenings ! " of passing soldiers. (But " Good evening " was not as bad as " Good-night." It was not so sudden, and one could just *see* the person who was bold enough to speak with daylight still in the sky.) Nobody ever played on Sunday. There were either the children's or the servants' morals to consider, and it was accounted more righteous to fall asleep over a novel with the cat on your knees ; but lest you should not be thought modern, you always referred at some time or other to a house where you visited and bridge was the order of the day on Sundays, or else you had friends who invariably played on Sunday evenings.

Behold Miss Johns going out to one of these bridge afternoons on a Tuesday, that being a day free from Church and State alike ! She was the ordinary Miss Johns of the *crêpe-de-chine* blouse and the coat and skirt, and not the transformed woman of the silk and old lace. Minnie, the housemaid, was just giving her a final brush in the hall, and imparting information at the same time.

" Mrs. Warre's lost her gardener, miss, that's been with her twenty years ! "

"Why, Minnie!" said Miss Johns, pausing in surprise. "That old man! Surely Mrs. Warre can't have turned him off?"

"He turned himself off," said Minnie the independent, with a high laugh that Miss Johns would not have tolerated in her own daughter had she had one. "Mrs. Warre wanted him to take on the stables now men are so short, and he said he'd about stood enough of them all these years. His cottage is so damp it's not fit for a dog, and they won't mend the roof or do a thing to it."

"How disgraceful!" said Miss Johns; and then in the same breath: "But I am afraid they are just as much hit by the War as everyone else."

"Well, they've got a new car," said Minnie, turning her mistress round critically. "And Miss Brenda's been driving it. They can't be so hard up."

"The Miss Warres are doing War-work in West-over," said Miss Johns apologetically. "Why does one apologize to one's servants rather than to one's equals? I expect they have to have a car of some kind to get there and back."

"And old Barnes says there's never a penny laid out on the garden this winter," went on Minnie with keen enjoyment. "And they want him to grow something out of nothing, and he's not going to. The Warren's going to rack and ruin. My! but it does look a sight!"

"I haven't noticed," said Miss Johns, as she stepped out of her own door. "Poor old Barnes! I hope he'll get another place soon."

"Oh, there's no fear of that—people are only too anxious for gardeners who are over the age," said Minnie, with a toss of her head. "It's Mrs. Warre

as will suffer. Serve her right with her mad ways ! Barnes says they are all mad at the Warren."

"Minnie ! Minnie !" protested Miss Johns as she set out ; but her thoughts followed the direction in which the girl had set them with a little shiver of interest. The Warren was so large and dark, and so buried in its own plantations, that it had an air of mystery enhanced by the reputation of its owners. There seemed to be a curse upon the family, for there was never a son or daughter born at the Warren who was straight or sane. Those that were not crippled were under a strange cloud of melancholy or moodiness that gained them their reputation for madness. The tragic house of Warre ! As Miss Johns passed their grim iron gates, she looked half fearfully up the heavy shrubberies and wondered over them. They came to Causeway Church and sat in a high-backed pew opposite to Squire Templeton's, and she knew them well by sight. They were all swarthy and handsome, with magnificent hair, the girls in particular seeming to put lighter beauties in the shade ; but they did not marry. Who would marry Brenda with her outbursts of temper, or Kathleen with her crutches ? And of the boys, Alaric had a club-foot and no roof to his mouth, so that he was handicapped in life, and Leofric had twice tried to commit suicide before he was twenty. Old Mr. Warre was dead long since, and his widow reigned as regent until her elder son's coming of age ; but she seemed to have assimilated the family temper, though she came of a different stock, and she was a very terrible old woman indeed.

"It must be dreadful to belong to an old family which has become degenerate !" said Miss Johns, looking through the gates. "The Warren always

reminds me of a house in one of Mrs. Henry Wood's novels." But she did not really think that it would be dreadful. Degenerate or not, the Warres held the romance of their very tragedy. They were a grim, gloomy people, who kept themselves aloof and did not visit much, even at Meary House or the Manor.

At the bridge party she naturally contributed her piece of local gossip. "I hear old Barnes is leaving the Warren—after all these years." (Miss Johns had only lived on Camp Rise for five, but she had gained the tone of an ancient inhabitant.) "His cottage wants repairing, and the garden is neglected, and nothing is done. I am afraid Mrs. Warre must be feeling the War!"

"Not she!" said the hostess as she cut. "She has always been like that since Mr. Warre's death—insanely extravagant over some party wall, and then letting her own house fall down for lack of repairs. (Your deal, Miss Johns.) I am sorry for Alaric when he comes into the property. They hardly ever entertain at the Warren now, it looks so disreputable."

"They run after the soldiers enough," said another lady. "A young cousin of mine was in Camp last year, and he told me the officers were always being asked up to the Warren. For the girls, I suppose. But who would marry Brenda or Kathleen, handsome though they are! Kathleen looks like nothing but a black witch."

"Wasn't that queer boy Leofric with your brother-in-law at Portsmouth, Mrs. Greene?"

"Oh, yes; Lawrence said he was a dreadful handful! So glad when they took him away. You know he ought never to have gone into the Army,

but he got in through the Public Schools' Corps, and then tried to shoot himself."

"Well, my sister's son met one of them up in London, and said he really ought not to have been at large."

The tragic house of Warre! Miss Johns thought of the stern young faces fronting her in church, and felt suddenly that her idle thought had been the true one. It would be dreadful to belong to this family! She could always feel so much more truly than she could think.

"Did you call Royals, Miss Johns?"

"I believe I did."

The bridge was of a loose order, interspersed with desultory conversation. But Miss Johns did not enjoy it as much as usual to-day. It seemed somehow as if everyone present had relations in the Navy or the Army but herself, and she thought wistfully how nice it would have been to refer to a male relative "In Camp," or to bring a khaki-clad figure up the Camp Rise as escort. The male relatives left to her were too elderly to do anything but an unostentatious duty in pushing on the depleted commerce of the country; the few far connections she had who were young were left in banks where they were apparently indispensable, or were pronounced "unfit." The best she could say was that they were special constables, and they wore no uniform, though they might risk their lives through night chills and falling bombs in London.

When she rose to go it was still daylight, but she would not stay for the after-tea rubber. "I am playing badly to-day," she said, and her late partner did not contradict her. She had not played badly, but she had held bad cards, and the players were so

indifferent that good cards were essential to them. As Miss Johns stepped out into the quiet highroad again she hesitated, and then, seeing that it was a fine evening and would not be dusk yet awhile, she turned her back on Trevena and proceeded up the highway, past other small or large detached houses behind their decorous hedges, and past the Vicarage, and past the "Penndragon," whose sign swung idly as yet over a closed door, for the inn did not open until six. Miss Johns was glad of this, as it was apt to be noisy of an evening, though mine host of the "Penndragon" allowed no drunkenness in his bar. The farmers might be market-merry, or even muddled in speech, but they must be able to walk straight out of the tap-room. But the subdued light from the inn and the cheerful chatter and sound of many voices alarmed Miss Johns when the place was open.

She walked on beyond the "Penndragon" to a low line of stone cottages with slate roofs and little slate porches over the doors to save the constant drip. It rains *some*, as the Americans say, in the West. In the last cottage of the row lived an old man who sold watercress and mushrooms and chestnuts, and wild flowers in the spring, for he lived by the fruits and flowers of God's good earth, and walked many miles to get them. Old Charley—he had no other name—was welcome at all the houses round about, for he did not drink and his manner was gentle rather than assertive. He was not a pushing salesman, and, indeed, he did most of his trade in Westover, the big town five miles off, rather than amongst the residents of the Camp Rise, though they bought his mushrooms and blackberries, and his trails of variegated ivy in

the winter. Miss Johns had not seen Charley of late, and feared he must be ill. But she found him quietly weeding in his tiny square of garden, wherein he had planted and tended the finest of the wild flowers that would form his stock in trade later on. He had only one room in the cottage, the rest of which belonged to two elderly women, who did washing and filled the place with steam on a Monday ; but they left the strip of garden in front of the cottage to the old man, and he spent more of his life there than indoors, being used to the open sky.

“ Good evening, Charley. I was afraid you might be ill—you have not been round of late,” said Miss Johns. She looked into the old lined face with its picturesque grey hair, and the evening felt fresher than it had done in the bridge room. Charley might be a ruffian—very likely was, since no one knew much of him or his life—but he had a curious, picturesque look about him that always put Miss Johns vaguely in mind of the Pied Piper of Hamlyn. He was just as unclean as any other working man whose labour lies in the open fields, but he did not look it, partly because he never had a stubby beard growing amongst his wrinkles, and partly because of the expression in his eyes. They were so clean that they made the rest of his face clean, or else the dirt was immaterial. He rose rather slowly to his feet from his kneeling position, for his joints were stiff, and smiled at Miss Johns.

“ No, I’ve not been ill, thank God ! ” he said simply. “ I’m glad to say I’ve very good health. I’m sixty-seven, and I can walk into Westover and back with my basket.”

“ I hope I shall be as good a walker when I am

your age, Charley—but I am sure I shall not ! I think twice about walking into Westover and back now.”

“ Oh, you mustn’t say that,” said the old man whimsically. “ I thought I should never do it when I began, but it comes with trying.” It was noticeable that he never dropped his h’s, though plenty of the Wessex folk did, and though his coat was so patched that it was difficult to tell what was the original material, Miss Johns always had the odd feeling that she was talking to a gentleman when she was with him.

“ I want to know if you can let me have some moss on Saturday, Charley, for the Church,” she said, almost as if she asked a favour.

“ Let me see—Saturday,” Charley ruminated. “ Yes, I shall be going to Weststock on Friday, and I can get some beautiful moss down that way.”

“ Weststock ! But that’s six miles from here, Charley ! Oh, you mustn’t go as far as that.”

“ It’s not too far,” said Charley, smiling. “ I shall get my cresses from the West Brook, and take them into Westover the next day. Look here, Madam, I have something to show you—a curiosity.” He disappeared into the tiny cottage, and reappeared with a little bunch of primroses—frail small blossoms, but primroses for all that. “ I never knew them so early,” said Charley tenderly, touching the forlorn heads. “ I have known a blossom here and there, but not a whole clump out as I found these. Will you have them, Madam ? ”

“ Thank you,” said Miss Johns, taking the flowers carefully in her hands. She felt extraordinarily touched, she did not know why. “ It has been a mild winter, on the whole.”

“ Yes, and a mild autumn, for I found ripe wild strawberries in November, before the frost set in. You wouldn’t think it, would you, but deep down in the bottoms it is as warm as summer.”

Miss Johns lingered longer at the gate of Charley’s cottage than she either knew or intended. When she turned with a last “ Good-night,” to walk down the road again, the sunset had vanished out of the western sky behind a pile of softest grey clouds, and the earth was darkened. She wished that she had brought her electric lantern, but she had not thought of it, knowing that she could leave her bridge party early. Her mind, however, was not in tune for fear, and she did not worry over it. She was soothed and comforted, and the impression of the tragic house of Warre that had haunted her earlier in the afternoon was wiped out. If anybody had told Charley that he possessed a personality that altered the atmosphere for other human beings, he would not have understood one word of it, though he would have smiled his courteous, humble smile that said more of his life and experiences than any history. Nor would Miss Johns have credited him with opening the windows of her mind to let out the shadows, any more than the old man himself. All she knew was that as she held the little bunch of primroses tenderly her eyes filled with something like a soft rain, and she thought again how nice it would have been to have someone belonging to her in the Army—a big son in khaki, who would have filled her life with a sense of protection even when he was not present. She had never longed for children as some women do, though she was fond of babies ; but the sudden desire for a grown-up son seemed as if it had lain at the roots of her being for a long time.

The doors of the "Penndragon" were open at last, and a subdued shaft of light shone across the road. Two or three carts were standing in front of the inn, abandoned by their owners, and from inside the bar came the noise of men's voices, and a high-pitched laugh. They were an orderly crowd save for one farmer in the corner, who was "market-merry," and repeated his name and status at intervals to whoever would listen. His voice rose above the other men's, and came out of the tap-room windows in the pauses of arguments on the price of pigs and the money wasted on the War: "I'm J. L. Hurder, of Causeway Farm, poor but honest. Never told a lie and never will do."

"I tell 'ee, my dear, they've spent twenty thousand on the huts down to Westover Ope, and the sheds for the horses. And then changed their minds, and never a marn nor a horse has ever been sent there."

"The huts are empty, after spoiling gude ground as might have bin planted. They've muved the soldiers to Ducketts, out beyond Camp, now."

"Twenty thousand pounds of public money spent, and nothing to show for it but empty huts and the ground lost!"

"I'm J. L. Hurder, of Causeway Farm, poor but honest. Never told a lie and never will do!"

"Dear me!" thought Miss Johns nervously, as the voices floated across the road. "I hope no one will come out of the 'Dragon' as I pass! That is Mr. Hurder, I know—and they say he is never strictly sober on a Tuesday after market."

As she reached the shaft of light two or three soldiers came up to the doors of the inn, and, before entering, flung a greeting to the female figure passing in the road.

“ Good-night ! ”

It meant nothing, but Miss Johns shied away from it as if pursued, and almost ran into the arms of a man who was coming out of the shoeing forge which stood opposite the “ Penndragon,” across the road. He was not riding, but she could see that he was in riding dress, and as she glanced this way and that for safety he raised his cap.

“ I think it is one of the ladies who was serving at the Wessex Hut last Thursday,” he said, before she could pass him. “ I hope those men did not frighten you ? ”

Miss Johns stopped with actual physical relief, and regaining her scattered senses, remembered that the young man before her was the invalid who was waiting for Mrs. Medlicott. As a friend of the Medlicotts he must, of course, be all right, though there were many people who would have said that he was probably all wrong for that very reason. Miss Johns took it for granted that he was a gentleman, and greeted him with relief, though she did not in the least recollect his name.

“ I was a little frightened, I confess. Not of the soldiers—they only said ‘ Good-night ’ to me—but of those very noisy people in the bar ! ”

Gilbert Wise looked across the road to the swing doors, whence issued the earnest arguments against maladministration and the voice of the farmer in its monotonous chant : “ I’m J. L. Hurder, of Causeway Farm, poor but honest. Never told a lie and never will do ! ”

“ Perhaps you will let me walk home with you,” he said in a careless fashion that seemed his usual manner, “ in case Mr. Hurder should be coming this

way? I am sure he would not do anybody any harm, for by this time he is blind and deaf to everything except his own identity. But he might alarm you, rather!"

"Thank you," said Miss Johns gratefully. "If I should not be taking you out of your way? My house is not half a mile further."

She wondered what errand had brought him up into the quiet country beyond Camp, but as he was at the forge, it probably had to do with horses—a vague term that covered an immense sphere of occupation and interest to men, in Miss Johns' mind. Under it she grouped racing, and the whole Remount Department, and the local saddler's, and the Wessex Moorland Hunt, and old sporting prints; just as "Guns" included rabbits, and leggings, and turnip fields, and the Royal Artillery, and dangerous little things called cartridges. They were all very masculine and rather attractive in a mysterious fashion. She liked the feeling of Gilbert Wise walking beside her in his riding boots, and when they creaked a little she felt the shy pleasure of a schoolgirl in a uniform, though he was not yet in khaki.

"The War does not seem much nearer an end, does it?" she said, and could not follow the idle speculation in his mind as to how many million times those words had been used to eke out a conversation.

"Are you very anxious over somebody?" he said gently, with a glance from the long-lashed eyes that was quite lost in the darkness. But as it was sheer habit with Mr. Wise it was not intended to reach its mark.

"No," said Miss Johns with a sigh. "I wish I were!" She laughed at herself a little, and raised

the primroses to her face tenderly. "I was playing bridge at a house near by this afternoon, and everybody in the room had somebody belonging to them in the Navy or Army except myself," she said honestly. "I daresay I should be horribly anxious if I had—but I almost missed the anxiety."

He did not answer her words directly, but, if she had known it, his next remark was the outcome of her own innocent statement. All she knew was that he moved a little nearer to her, and she felt the comfortable safety that a policeman would have inspired. Miss Johns was very dependent upon policemen in the thoroughfares of life.

"It is very dark out here in the country," he said. "Don't you think you had better take my arm? You would be less likely to stumble."

Miss Johns would probably have declined a proceeding which she felt a little odd, but that at the moment she really did stumble over the rough path by the roadside, and it was his one useful hand that saved her. She realized now that his left arm was at last out of the sling, but that he was not using it, and when he offered her his right, she took it with a curious impression that he was not quite like other young men, and that it was perhaps because he was a Canadian. She felt oddly at home with him, and put it down to the reputation of the Colonies for hospitality and friendliness—a general atmosphere of unconventional kindness—though he had neither accent nor mannerism to divide him from Englishmen. Perhaps he was really English, but had gone abroad to make his way in the Dominion, and enlisted there. It seemed the only feasible explanation.

"What is it that you want?" he said simply.

"I want a big son," said Miss Johns, with a little catch in her breath. "Or even a nephew would be something." It struck her afterwards as a horribly unconventional thing to have said, almost intimate, and she could only put it down to the influence of the darkness and this unlooked-for walking with her hand on the arm of a stranger. He did not take it as unusual or embarrassing; he seemed in a subtle fashion sympathetic.

"I suppose you couldn't adopt a nephew?" he said, and no doubt he looked down again with those expressive eyes, but they neither of them knew it. "I'm singularly without relations just now myself. I'm quite ready to be adopted."

"I'm afraid I should want to know a little more of you first, and you of me," said Miss Johns more lightly, as they reached her own gate. She even laughed a little—it seemed suddenly so absurd. "This is my house. May I ask you in to—to have a cigarette?" she hazarded with an inspiration. "I'm afraid I have none, but if you will smoke your own——"

"I should like it, but I mustn't," he said in the same easy tone. "I have to walk back almost to Westover, where I am staying with some people, and it will take me all my time. But I will come another day, if I may."

"Yes, pray do. I shall be very pleased to see you," said Miss Johns, but in her secret heart she felt a little dismay. She knew nothing of this young man save that the Medlicotts took him about with them; but then everybody took the young officers about, without so many social distinctions as before the War, and the Medlicotts were proverbially careless

so long as they were amused. Supposing that he were not quite nice—an undesirable acquaintance? And she had young and giddy servants. Miss Johns did not quite know what she feared, but she felt a sense of relief in remembering that she need not be at home to him even if he did call. At any rate, she would not be unfriendly now. She shook hands with him, and thanked him very sincerely for having seen her home.

“For I confess I *was* a little frightened of those men,” she said.

“J. L. Hurder, of Causeway Farm, poor but honest?” he said quizzically, and the crooked eyebrow rose a little and the corner of his mouth that matched it. “I am very glad I happened to be in the forge.” He shook her hand warmly, and then as he raised his cap and moved off, he spoke over his shoulder: “Good-night—Auntie!”

That was a little impertinent, Miss Johns thought, as she walked up the gravel path to the front door, rather ruffled. “No, I don’t think he’s a nice man—I think he’s fast!” she said reprovingly. “But no doubt it was partly my own fault for having said I wanted a nephew. I hope he won’t laugh about it with other young officers.” But even as she framed the unkind thought she knew that he would not. “And I can tell Minnie that I am not at home to him if he calls,” she reassured herself.

And it was only as she crossed her own threshold that she recollected that she could not tell Minnie, because she did not know his name.

CHAPTER III

“ Lo ! 'tis a gala night
Within the lonesome, latter years ! ”
EDGAR ALLAN POE.

MRS. THORNHILL rushed into Trevena a few weeks later and demanded tea-cups.

“ Can you lend us tea-cups ? ” she panted, for she was apt to become flustered in an emergency. “ I am lending spoons and forks, and the glass comes from the Mess. I don't know what we shall do for chairs, but I suppose some of the married officers have furnished houses.”

“ Yes, I *have* tea-cups,” said Miss Johns, with a bewildered idea that the Government were going to commandeer her crockery for some purpose unknown. “ Do you mean just common ones, or my best service ? ”

“ Oh, as common as possible, for goodness sake. One never knows what may not be broken. And coffee-cups—have you any coffee-cups ? ”

“ Yes, I have coffee-cups, stored away somewhere,” admitted Miss Johns. “ I do not take coffee after dinner ” (it did not agree with the fresh herrings) “ and I so seldom entertain. But in my father's lifetime of course we had to have them ! ” She drew herself up with a little feeling of pride, and a remem-

brance of those far-off parties of her youth when tea and coffee were always served to guests on their arrival. The company had been rather motley, being gathered together for business reasons of the doctor's practice, but Mrs. Thornhill might not know that, and Miss Johns ignored it, or rather viewed it through the softened radiance of the past. Without any suspicion of misrepresentation she often transfigured her circumstances into what she would have liked to have rather than what they were. The person most deceived was herself.

"That's all right, then," said the Vicar's wife, fussing towards the door, without having attempted to sit down. She had called hurriedly in the morning, and been shown into the dining-room as the only room with a fire, whereby she discovered Miss Johns engaged in checking the tradesmen's weekly books and trying as usual to see whether a further saving could be effected in the lean row of figures. The woman of limited income is an artist in economics and could teach the Treasury many things undreamed of in its philosophy.

"You are lending tea and coffee-cups—Mrs. Greene table-cloths"—Mrs. Thornhill was rapidly making notes in a small book on her way to the hall-mat.

"But what is it *for*?" gasped Miss Johns, who saw her tea and coffee-cups vanishing into the unknown for a mysterious purpose.

"Why, this dance at the Cedars, of course!" said Mrs. Thornhill testily. "Haven't you heard of it? I thought you knew all about it when that Mr. Wise—the Canadian, you know—said he knew you would lend us crockery."

"A dance at the Cedars! But it's empty—it has been empty for months."

"I know it has, but the younger officers of the Wessex—the bachelors—are giving a dance there, and we are all lending things to furnish it just for the night. It is only a very impromptu affair, of course, but all the girls in the neighbourhood are going. Lady Gracia is even sending Primrose under my care."

Mrs. Thornhill's complaisance in the charge was obvious and perfectly comprehensible to Miss Johns. She wondered wistfully if she would be allowed to go and look on, having lent her cups and saucers, but she really did not claim it as a right, though it thrilled her with expectation to think of it.

"That odd Mr. Wise—do you know much of him?—was calling at Meary House when I was last there," said Mrs. Thornhill even as she stepped out of Trevena. "He was talking to Miss Templeton about the dance, and it was then that he said he was positive you had tea-cups you would lend. I don't think Lady Gracia entirely likes these young men from nowhere in particular being acquainted with Primrose; but anyone who wears uniform now seems to get in anywhere. And the General has called on the Mess, of course."

"Mr. Wise has been to see me once or twice," said Miss Johns a little reluctantly. She had a feeling, like the Vicar's wife, that he was a young man "from nowhere in particular"—especially as he was a Canadian—and that the acquaintance reflected no credit in spite of his khaki. "He was kind enough to walk home with me to the gate one night when there were some soldiers about," she added apologetically.

"It is spoiling the neighbourhood, having all these rough men of the New Army about," declared the Vicar's wife as she departed. She did not seem to attach much importance either way to Mr. Wise having called on Miss Johns, for which the mistress of Trevena was secretly relieved. It seemed to her rather an odd thing to have happened, and, indeed, she had found Gilbert Wise rather an odd young man, as Mrs. Thornhill had said, and not a visitor to boast by. His having been through the ranks made him seem a little inferior, from the Camp Rise standpoint, to other young men who had started with a commission, though no doubt all classes had enlisted in the Dominion, which was most loyal and imperialistic of them. He had called two or three times, and had tea with Miss Johns, and smoked his own cigarettes as she had warned him he must, and had sat down to her little piano and sung to her in a melting tenor voice that would have filled her with unalloyed pleasure if she had not felt it another unusual proceeding.

"You sing very beautifully," she had hastened to assure him. "Quite like a professional." She meant it for unstinted praise, but his next words discomfited her still more.

"I was on the stage for six months once," he said. "I played most of Hayden Coffin's parts."

He seemed to have been a rolling stone unmossed by respectability, and she would not ask him why or when he left the stage for fear of unearthing more dubious disclosures. He used to look at her with his expressive, mischievous eyes, and called her "Auntie," occasionally, half under his breath, so that she hardly knew whether to ignore it or to be irritated into cor-

recting him. If he were trying to fill that place of the absent nephew in Miss Johns' life he certainly did not avow it. He only came to see her occasionally, and amused her a little and shocked her rather, and left her doubtful as to whether she wanted him to come again or no. Perhaps that was his way of entertaining her.

He was at least the agent, conscious or unconscious, of Miss Johns receiving a card for the dance at the Cedars, and the mere anticipation filled her with a pleasure certainly denied to most chaperons. She ranked with the few older women present who acted in this unamiable capacity, of course, and could count on knowing one or two of them at least to speak to, and not being left out in the cold. Mrs. Greene and Mrs. Thornhill would both be there, having helped in the furnishing like Miss Johns, and it was arranged between her and Mrs. Greene to share the fly from the "Penndragon," Mrs. Thornhill being picked up by the carriage from Meary House.

It seemed a great occasion to Miss Johns when she dressed for it, though it was only a little dance in an empty house got up by the younger officers of the 17th Wessex. She had had a fire lighted in her bedroom, and she enjoyed the unwonted extravagance as much as the wearing of her finest underlinen and silk stockings and black-beaded shoes, all so carefully kept in tissue paper in the old-fashioned tallboy in Spanish mahogany that would have filled a furniture collector with envy. It was a chilly night in February, and Miss Johns shivered as she dressed herself in the thin garments, but it was as much with excitement as cold. She put on the black silk gown with the transparent sleeves, and some of her oldest and most

cobwebby lace, and her brown hair was more carefully done than usual, though in the same way that she always did it. Some instinct of good taste prevented Miss Johns from ever attempting to follow the prevailing and unsuitable fashions in dressing her hair, and she wore no jewellery save the antique pendant and brooch in pink topaz that had belonged to her grandmother. When she looked in the glass she felt pleased—not because she had regained anything of youth or good looks, but because the reflection showed her a gentlewoman, be her origin what it might. Her clothes all smelt of lavender, and she loved the daintiness of them and her thin silk stockings which were so inappropriate to winter.

“It must be very nice to be rich,” said Miss Johns, as she put the glove-stretchers into a pair of white gloves bought in a sale some years ago and carefully hoarded. “It must be one of the pleasures of the aristocracy to dress in beautiful and costly clothes. I do not think that I should ever lose the pleasure of it, even if I did it every day.”

Minnie brought her evening cloak and laid it heedfully over her shoulders. Minnie was more respectful in manner than usual. Her mistress had gone a step up in the world in her opinion in receiving this invitation to a dance at the Camp. She knew all about it, because she was walking out with the Superintendent of the Wessex Hut, and being in the midst of the barrack Square he came in for all the local gossip. This was amongst the more serious of Minnie's loves, for the Superintendent was an earnest worker in the Y.M.C.A., and his atmosphere had sobered her—for the time being.

“The carriage is here, Miss,” said Minnie, with an

air of some importance. "I'll make up your fire before we go to bed, and leave your hot milk in the saucepan on the etna. You'll only have to light it. Now don't you forget!" she added, in the more bullying tone of kindness that her servants generally adopted towards Miss Johns.

It was nice of Minnie to say the carriage rather than the fly. It added the right note to the festivity, and made Miss Johns feel that she was doing something rather luxurious and upper-class. Mrs. Greene was already in the vehicle, and greeted Miss Johns affably, but without adding to the delusion of their excursion.

"I'm afraid it's going to be a dark night," she said. "I hope old Peter can see. The last time I had a fly from the 'Dragon' they sent me a different cabman, and he nearly turned us into the ditch."

There were no illusions about Mrs. Greene.

Besides her evening cloak Miss Johns had a beautiful pink fluffy shawl with her that she had crocheted herself. She could knit and crochet in wondrous patterns, and her shawls were works of art. When she left her cloak in the extempore cloak-room, she carried the pink shawl with her in case of draughts, for an empty house, hastily furnished for one evening's entertainment, did not sound very comfortable, and those transparent sleeves, though becoming, were certainly chilly.

There were fires in the ball-room, however, one at each end, for it was a large double room with folding doors flung back to give the dancers room to pass through. Tea and coffee were being served in the ante-room (Miss Johns recognized her cups with a thrill of pride. *She* had contributed to all this splendour, and was helping to entertain the County!),

and the chaperons were accommodated with a sofa and some chairs in a recess in the ball-room, the corresponding recess in the further room being taken up by the band. All the girls from the neighbourhood, as Mrs. Thornhill had said, appeared to be present—Major and Mrs. Burton's girls (five of them, the youngest only a "flapper," with her hair tied in the regulation flapper bow), Colonel Halse's daughter, Brenda Warre with her handsome dark face, Primrose Templeton, Tina and Mavis Medlicott; and besides the young men in khaki there were the eligible bachelors of the place, Eric Hoddington, who was one of the Remount officers for South Wessex on the strength of a knowledge of horses, and a big red-haired young man who was laughing and talking rather loudly with the Medlicotts. "That's Sir Arthur Penndragon," said Mrs. Greene to Miss Johns with characteristic acrimony. "He's got an Exemption Badge, and no one knows how. Everybody says he ought to join up. He has had a boxful of white feathers sent to him, and hardly dares to appear in the hunting field now, people are so rude to him!"

But Miss Johns looked with trained admiration at the broad-backed figure and the florid face.

"He is a very fine looking man!" she hazarded timidly.

"He is like nothing but a young farmer!" said Mrs. Greene, tearing the delicate fabric of Miss Johns' visions to pieces. She had harsh mental hands. "If he were not Sir Arthur Penndragon everybody would admit it."

Her plain speaking was no less an attitude than Miss Johns' reverence. In her heart she resented the fact that Lady Penndragon did not call on her lesser

neighbours at the Camp Rise, and kept the gates of Dragonby open only to the County. Unvarnished criticism of the snobbishness of others was Mrs. Greene's way of showing her own. She knew Lady Penndragon's reputation perfectly well. She knew Sir Arthur's. Had she had daughters, she would have protested that she could not have admitted him into her house. And yet so romantic is the world we do not live in, that she was sore with fortune for keeping her out of an intimacy with the very people she condemned. They had at least something that she had not. That constituted the glamour of their lives.

Mrs. Thornhill half turned from keeping a watchful eye on Miss Templeton, and flung a gossip over her shoulder.

"Lady P. would have come to-night only that she was afraid she might meet Lady G.! She has no objection to shaking a loose leg, even at her age!"

("I think Mrs. Thornhill uses rather common expressions!" thought Miss Johns. "I am sure Lady Penndragon would not do anything unbecoming.")

"And Lady G. stayed away for the same reason," said Mrs. Greene. "They do love each other!"

"Well, Lady G. has reason and dignity on her side," said Mrs. Thornhill in defence of her own patroness. "I don't know that she would have liked Primrose coming to-night if she had known that Sir Arthur was to be here."

"He goes to Meary House, to ceremonious dinners," said Mrs. Greene cynically. "And, anyhow, he won't ask Miss Templeton to dance—she is far too dull to suit him!"

"One hardly knows what partners a girl will

get at this sort of thing!" said the Vicar's wife anxiously. "There's that odd Mr. Wise speaking to her now."

Miss Johns had not noticed Gilbert Wise until that moment, because she had been furtively watching Sir Arthur talking to the Medlicott girls, and breaking into an audible laugh that widened his broad face still more. "I wonder what the joke was?" thought Miss Johns, smiling sympathetically. "I expect they are very merry, high-spirited girls, though people call them fast."

What Tina Medlicott had just said to Penndragon was: "Look at the advertisement for Beecham's Pills on the sofa! Don't they all look as if it would be worth a guinea a box to them?" drawing his momentary attention to the chaperons.

"Jaundiced, all the lot!" he said. "Except that little woman in black with the lace. Who's she?"

"I don't know. Some local faded flowerlet, left over from the matrimonial market of the eighties, I should think. Mavis, do you know the lady with the lace? Sir Arthur's struck!"

"No," said Mavis Medlicott, screwing up her eyes and staring at Miss Johns as if she were an object at a great distance. "She's rather a dove, isn't she? Like any old thing out of 'Cranford.'"

"She looks like a lady—rather a good sort, too," said the young man, with a vague sense of something gracious and old-fashioned that he never saw in his mother's contemporaries—and yet she must be his mother's contemporary.

But Miss Johns did not know that they were looking at or speaking of her, because her attention had been caught by Mrs. Thornhill's reference to Gilbert Wise.

He had at last returned to duty, and was in khaki, but it was as well that it was his right arm on which his partner depended and not his left, for the Medicott girls liked a romp and were by no means the airy-fairy type of partner. He had been entertained at the Manor, and, of necessity, he had asked them first for dances, and then Brenda Warre, and his Colonel's daughter. It was some time before Primrose Templeton could give him a waltz, and the evening was half-way through when he obtained it.

"I hope you won't mind dancing with me," he said demurely, as he put his hand rather lightly on her waist.

"Why should I mind?" asked the young lady with some faint reproof in her tone. His words were either idiotic or suggestive, and she deprecated both possibilities.

"I've been smoking!" said Wise with a little sigh. His lids were drooping, so that it was almost impossible to see his eyes for the tangle of lashes, even had Primrose looked up—which she did not. She stiffened a little in his arms, that was all, and her face expressed nothing at all.

"I know it's a bad habit, anyhow!" he said audaciously, and the corner of his mouth lifted still more than Nature had made it. Miss Templeton raised her misty eyes as high as his lips, and concluded that she was being laughed at. That was insufferable impertinence. She also saw with some surprise that his mouth reminded her of a child's, and wondered why until she realized that the curves went up rather than down like most grown-up human beings. It was a mouth with kinks in it. He ought to have grown a moustache.

"I cannot take back what I said," she said seriously. "I do think it a bad habit."

Then there was silence while they danced the waltz out. Miss Templeton danced as she did everything else, a little too sedately. There was no spring in her. But Gilbert Wise was a perfect partner, even with only one arm. He moved easily and swiftly, without hopping or bending his knees, and he seemed to steer in a crowded space by instinct. When the last few chords died away and his hand fell from her waist, Primrose wished that it were not over, and wondered if he would ask her again before the end.

"But I don't think he likes me," she said in her own mind with some dissatisfaction at herself. Why did she not attract young men like the Medlicotts, or Mabel Halse? Each of her hosts had asked her to keep a dance for him—Mr. Roberts, Mr. Chumleigh (Camp Rise speculated as to whether he wrote it Cholmondeley—it sounded a better family), Captain Gregson, Mr. Mesurier, Captain Jones the Adjutant, and Mr. Wise. But she felt discontentedly that it was because they visited at Meary House, because she was General Templeton's daughter.

"Will you come and sit out?" said Wise. "Or are you afraid of catching cold? It is draughty on the stairs."

"I do not catch cold easily," said Primrose, as if there were something rather wrong in catching cold.

"No," said Wise sweetly. "That's a bad habit, too. You haven't any bad habits, have you?"

Primrose began to feel as if she disliked this young man. Had he been the little boy he somehow reminded her of, she would have liked to box his ears. She sat stiffly on the stairs beside him with laughing couples

talking above and below—two of the Burton girls, and Brenda Warre, her dark face flushed with exercise and excitement into splendid beauty—and found no word to say to him.

“Miss Templeton,” said Wise suddenly, “it isn’t Christian to hate me!”

Her smooth oval face flushed a little. She was totally unused to being teased, and it was upsetting her quite unusually. “I don’t hate my acquaintances!” she said, consigning him to the outer circle of a large visiting list. “I think that is the next dance.” And she stood up to follow Brenda Warre, who had risen in front of her.

“Do you ride?” said Wise casually, walking slowly down the stairs at her side.

She would have liked to have returned no answer if it had not been rude. But that was against all her training and upbringing, besides putting her at a disadvantage. “Yes,” she said simply.

“Where do you ride?” he asked with one of those provocative glances sideways at her. He was laughing at her again. Insufferable!

“In the neighbourhood,” she said indifferently. “With the coachman.”

“The coachman doesn’t count,” said Wise to himself, as he accompanied her back to the sofa where Mrs. Thornhill was sitting, all welcome smiles for her charge.

Gilbert Wise moved a step further and stood beside Miss Johns. “You look so nice!” he said, bending down to speak to her. “I am so proud of being related to you. Do come and have something to eat with me. There is a sort of supper, and I know all the best of it.”

Miss Johns was a little flushed with excitement, and the pleasure of seeing all those people in the same room with her; she was really amongst the County, almost of them for this magic evening. She had never seen them so close before, and without hats or outdoor garments too. She had caught a glimpse of Sir Arthur Penndragon driving tandem sometimes before the War, and Eric Hoddington had splashed her with mud from his car as he passed her; but they had been far apart, divided not only by actual but by social space. Now she was seeing them quite near, and hearing them talk. Dear me! If it had not been for a sense of her own insignificance I think she would have been almost heady. Gilbert Wise's offer was a further temptation to actually brush shoulders with them at supper.

"Do you think I ought?" she said in an answering confidence. "Perhaps some of these other ladies——"

"But I am not their nephew!" he said, opening his wonderful eyes for a minute, and Miss Johns was half annoyed and half amused.

"You *will* remind me of my silliness!" she said, as she rose and took his arm. "Do you think I might leave my shawl here, or shall I bring it?"

"I'll carry it," he said, and threw it lightly over his other arm. "What a pretty shawl—just like pink meringue! I don't believe any other lady here has a pink meringue shawl."

"They would think it very old-fashioned to wear a shawl at all," said Miss Johns honestly; but she knew that her shawl was soft and feminine, and that he had liked it for that reason. "Only I did not want to take cold."

In the ante-room, long since cleared of tea and coffee, there was the "sort of supper" that Wise had foretold. He found her a seat at a small table, and waited on her as devotedly as if she had been the prettiest girl present. Indeed, he had rather nice manners for a young man who came from nowhere in particular. "But I believe they are all very chivalrous in Canada!" said Miss Johns to herself innocently.

At the centre table she could see Tina Medlicott with Eric Hoddington, and Brenda Warre with Captain Jones, besides other girls whose names she did not know, since they were part of the nomadic world of the Camp. It was very pleasant to eat chicken in aspic and to drink cup in the middle of the night, watching the radiant young faces. Miss Johns was so frugal of her own pleasures that she really enjoyed the nice food and the wine as much or more than the younger folk. Chicken in aspic was a treat to her, though she hastened to remind herself that they had always had it in those famous parties of her father's lifetime.

"And I really don't think it is any better than our cook did it, even though it *has* come from the Mess!" she added.

Tina Medlicott, looking up from her salmi with twinkling eyes, saw the couple in the corner and commented to her partner.

"Gilbert Wise has taken on Sir Arthur's old bit of Honiton," she said. "He was quite struck with her at the beginning of the evening. Rather a dove, isn't she? I do like her pink shawl!"

Eric's supercilious glance followed Tina's to the little table, and embraced both the Canadian "ranker"

and Miss Johns. He took his stand at once on the fact that he was Eric Hoddington.

"Who is she?" he said with a subtlety of tone that added: "I know who *I* am!"

"Oh, I don't know—any old dear! It's just like Gilbert to have brought her in to feed. I could kiss him when he does that sort of thing!"

"Why don't you?" said Eric, with his most flippant insolence. "Just got his commission, hasn't he? I daresay it's usual in the ranks."

Tina turned her shrewd eyes on him with an insolence equal to his own. "They get very pretty fellows in the ranks," she commented coolly. "And because you are outclassed, Errie, you needn't be spiteful. You don't like Gilbert Wise."

"My dear Tina, you have just told me that you do, and you have said you should like to kiss him! You can't expect me to be amiable."

"You couldn't if you tried," said Miss Medlicott candidly. "Give me something more to eat, please, if it's only standard bread. I'm famished."

She had known Eric Hoddington from nursery days, and it had not tended to respect, though the Hoddingtons, father and son, came of a family that had owned land in Wessex for many generations. Of course, the farmers might do that, but the Hoddingtons had owned it—not worked it. They were the proprietors of Hoddington's Bank, which had been established by James Hoddington's grandfather—Eric's great-grandfather—an institution in which the small tradesmen and the yeomanry believed as they did in the Almighty. Indeed, the Almighty might—and did—mismanage the seasons so that the hay crop failed, or trade was bad; but Hoddingtons conducted their

business methodically in little stucco branches in the villages and a big stucco branch in Westover, and kept the smallest accounts with beautiful neatness and a bland charge for the trouble. James Hoddington was a widower, and his son being still an eligible bachelor, they lived together in the big family mansion between Camp Rise and Ducketts, and motored into Westbury on separate days to spend an hour or so in the manager's room at the Bank. James Hoddington was an inveterate fisherman, and an art collector. Eric hunted. It is true that he looked for gaps in the stone walls, and left somebody else to bore the first hole in the hedge when he took a bank ; but his pink coat and top hat were carefully shabby to suggest hard usage, and he paid a hundred and fifty to two hundred for his hunters, which is a big price in the Wessex moorland. But Tina Medlicott, who did not look for gaps, and would bore through any hedge, said that his riding was characteristic—he took the credit and other people took the falls.

Further down the table Brenda Warre was wondering if Sir Arthur Penndragon would ask her to dance, or neglect her as he had so far. Neither Penndragon nor Eric Hoddington had danced with her, not because they intended any slight, but because they were both intensely selfish men and she did not amuse or interest them. About Hoddington she did not care, but she cared intensely about Penndragon. He had been one of the few male personalities in a life far narrower than Miss Johns could conceive, and though he was not particularly attractive, or particularly anything except large and florid, he had the position at least that Brenda would have liked. Years ago, as a schoolgirl, he had made love to her, and she had not

forgotten it. Perhaps he feared to compromise himself as she grew up, or perhaps he no longer admired her. Their lives of late years seemed to have drifted apart, so that she rarely met him save on occasions like the present, when it was possible for him to greet her and then absorb himself with girls like the Medicotts and Colonel Halse's daughter. Brenda felt the slight, and the shadow of the tragic house of Warre darkened her face again.

"How very handsome Miss Warre is!" said Miss Johns to her pseudo nephew, as he gently insisted on her eating strawberry ice, "because it matched her shawl!" "I wish she did not look so unhappy." It seemed unreasonable to be unhappy when one was young and good-looking and at a dance. Miss Johns had forgotten that it is in youth that the pinpricks of life are most intolerable.

"She reminds me of a girl I saw at Causeway Farm," said Gilbert, making eyes at Miss Warre the while he criticized her. "I hope you have not been frightened with J. L. Hurder of late!"

"Dreadful man!" said Miss Johns, smiling. "I wish he did not go to the 'Dragon' so often. It is a great failing."

"He is the best judge of cattle in the neighbourhood," said Gilbert Wise. "That is his virtue—the 'Dragon' is only his weakness."

"But that does not make it any better!" said Miss Johns, rather shocked.

"Where is he to go to meet his friends, and talk about stock, if he does not go to the 'Dragon'?" said Wise thoughtfully. "Have you been in Causeway farmhouse? It has two sitting-rooms—one is the kitchen, and the other is used to store mangolds."

The working farmer does not sit down in his own house much when he comes in from the fields."

"But if he has a daughter, as you say, she ought to look after him and make him comfortable."

"Oh, Auntie, I didn't say! The lady like Miss Warre was a girl who goes there to milk because J. L. Hurder, poor but honest, has lost most of his men through the War. I went into the shippen, and it is one of the best shippens in Wessex, and the dirtiest, and the girl was milking in all that filth."

"I believe it must be old Joe Preece's daughter Lottie," said Miss Johns with sudden interest. "They are in my District. I heard that she had gone to work on some farm; she was a big, dark girl, rather ungainly I thought, while she was at school. I did not see any likeness in her to Miss Warre."

"She is not at school now, and she is a very fine girl with big, dark eyes. If you saw her in that pretty gown that Miss Warre is wearing, with her hair done up like that, you would think her the better looking of the two!"

Miss Johns felt a sudden suspicion—uncertainty—mistrust. She remembered her first hesitation in asking Gilbert Wise to her little house because she had young servants and he had been in the ranks—a common soldier, and a young man from nowhere. And then he used his eyes so! She did not like this admiration of J. L. Hurder's milkmaid, and she hoped that his military duties would keep him away from wandering into the Causeway Farm. Besides, she felt a sense of responsibility since the girl came from her own District. What a dreadful thing if Lottie Preece should get acquainted with a young officer at Camp! Had he still been a private she

would not quite have approved ; but as an officer it sounded so much worse. She did not mean to be uncharitable, but her sense of Gilbert Wise's kindness was troubled by visions of him turning Lottie's head with those inevitable glances, and she was almost relieved when he took her back to the chaperons' corner and went away to find his next partner.

" You seem to have got a young man ! " said Mrs. Greene facetiously, as Miss Johns rejoined her.

" It was very kind of Mr. Wise. I really enjoyed my supper," said Miss Johns quietly, wrapping the pink shawl round her shoulders.

" He has quite adopted you," said Mrs. Greene, without unkindness, however, for she liked Miss Johns and was glad that she should get something to eat. Miss Johns was uncomfortably conscious that it was rather she who had adopted Gilbert Wise by her sentimental breakdown in the dark, however unintentionally ; but all she said was, " Oh, he is a Canadian, you know ! " as if that covered a multitude of eccentricities.

She saw him dancing with Tina Medlicott a minute later, then with Mavis, and then with Brenda Warre. But it was quite late, and the dancing was nearly at an end, when he walked up to Miss Templeton again.

" If you have forgiven me, will you dance with me ? " he said.

" I didn't know that I had anything to forgive, Mr. Wise," said Primrose indifferently.

" You haven't—but I hope you will dance with me all the same."

" I am afraid we ought to be going home—I think Mrs. Thornhill is tired."

" So do I—when this dance is over."

If he had not danced so well, she told herself, she would have said "No." But she was young, and it was pleasant to dance, and one so rarely had such a good partner. This first parting between herself and her principles did not strike Miss Templeton as a choice between two ways, and she was barely conscious of having been overruled as she gave herself up to the motion and her enjoyment. She danced better than she had before, too, as if he had inspired her, and received a double pleasure from her own success. When the waltz ended (he always asked her for waltzes, she noticed—not for one-steps or Bostons or anything new), he stood for one brief second with his hand on her waist and looked down on her. Her soft hair had become loosened and almost touched her misty eyes, and she had a shy, faint colour, as if life had suddenly flashed before her and stained her pale cheeks with the reflection of its glow. It was only a reflection as yet, for the glow was hardly in her own veins.

"Now you may go home!" said Gilbert Wise softly. He offered her his arm and led her back to Mrs. Thornhill's safe keeping, and the Vicar's wife made immediate use of him to go and find the carriage, being of a practical mind. It was her business to arrange all details of arrival and departure, and to see that her charge got home safely and in good time, and young men were made to be of use. But the flush on Primrose's face had deepened, and she spoke with a most unusual resentment of the arrangements made for her.

"I hope Mr. Wise did not mind. I think he wanted to dance again. Did we interfere with his engagements?"

"Oh, that is all right, my dear," the Vicar's wife

hastened to assure her. "He will get another dance when we are gone. But how sweet of you to think of it! Isn't it sweet of her?" she appealed to Mrs. Greene and Miss Johns, who had followed them into the cloak-room and were being helped into their cloaks by a sleepy attendant. And, of course, the two ladies said that it was too good-natured and that Miss Templeton need not be so considerate.

"I hope he'll think to call our fly also," said Mrs. Greene. "I shall send him back if he doesn't, I assure you. He saw that we were leaving, too."

"Oh, I am sure he will do that—he is very kind!" deprecated Miss Johns, with a remorseful sense of having allowed her doubts about Lottie to damp her gratitude for the supper.

Miss Templeton turned to her quietly, and, without speaking, helped to adjust the fluffy pink shawl so that it should envelope her head and shoulders like a hood. Miss Johns was quite touched. "She really is a very sweet girl!" she thought.

Both the carriage and the fly were waiting when the ladies made their way into the neglected drive of the Cedars; but Gilbert Wise was not there. No doubt he had hastened back to the ball-room and explained his absence to his abandoned partners, to get what dances remained to him. Perhaps Miss Templeton had expected this, or perhaps she had thought that he would be waiting to help her in as he had at the Hut. She was again rather silent on the homeward drive, and Mrs. Thornhill did the talking; but then Primrose never did chatter over her pleasures like other girls. As she dropped Mrs. Thornhill at the Vicarage, however, she roused herself to ask a question:

"What is the name of that lady who is on our shift at the Hut? She was sitting with you on the sofa to-night, and she wore a pink shawl. I never can remember."

"Oh, Miss Johns," said Mrs. Thornhill in a non-committal tone. "She lives at that little villa down the road, called Trevena."

Primrose did not comment further. She said "Good-night—and thank you so much for chaperoning me. I shall see you on Thursday at the Hut," and leaned back in her corner as the carriage drove away. She was not thinking of Miss Johns now—she was wondering whether they would keep it up very late at the Cedars, and who Mr. Wise was dancing with at the present moment. . . .

Miss Johns went home to her little house and found that her fire had gone out; but she made her milk hot, despite the supper she had eaten, and put away all her best clothes very carefully before she got into bed. She felt as if the evening had done her good, and had been extraordinarily interesting. The County could never seem quite like strangers to her again since she had seen them without their hats!

And Brenda Warre went home also, when all the dancing was over, to the still, dark house in its melancholy park, and sat for a long time in her bedroom without attempting to take off the pretty frock in which Wise had said that Lottie Preece would have looked just as well. To her the evening had not been a success, though she had not been a wallflower, and was quite the handsomest girl in the room. Sir Arthur Penndragon had not asked her to dance, and she brooded over the fancied slight as a happier circumstanced girl would not have done. She was just

as eager for life as Lottie Preece going out to work at Causeway Farm ; but the boundaries of her position hemmed her in as surely as the dark plantations round about the Warren, in which the wind moaned like something fearfully inhuman.

It was dawn before she undressed and crept shivering into bed, but she could not sleep. When the February daylight came in at the uncurtained window, she rose again, and throwing up the sash, leaned out. She felt feverish with the purposeless life in her veins, and the air was grateful. Before the house the formal and rather dreary garden spread out to the grass land that had been used for grazing since the War, for times were bad for the Warren as Miss Johns had tried to think in excuse for the place being neglected. Amongst the empty beds and shrubs a man was already at work, whistling cheerily since he imagined himself secure from being overheard by the family, who he supposed to be still in bed. He was a young man, but hitherto exempt from Service on account of a widowed mother he supported, and he had not long worked at the Warren, having taken old Barnes' place in the garden. Across the wintry morning Brenda Warre was suddenly startled by the extreme beauty of his face and figure, obscured though they might be by his soil-stained clothes ; but had he been dressed like those men at the dance last night, not one of them could have compared with him. Occasionally one sees his type in the lower orders in England, but not often. Tall, well-made, with a ruddy face, blue eyes and warm brown hair curling picturesquely under his cap—what more had he to ask of Nature ? She stared at him half fascinated, and as he raised himself from digging the soil over,

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to straighten his back, he glanced up and saw her white face at the window and the mass of her splendid hair to frame it. He was at least as taken aback as she, and for a minute they gazed at each other in mutual wonder. Was beauty such as this possible upon earth, even though it belonged to two such different spheres? She looked down, and he looked up, appropriately. A strange thing to happen on a cold February morning! And suddenly Brenda knew that she was leaning over the sill with her night-dress slipping from her white shoulders, and the warm blood flowed over her from her forehead to her innocent breasts. She drew back, half frightened by the warmth of his blue eyes, and her lips parted breathlessly.

A minute later she had shut the window and was lying once more beneath the decorous cool sheets. Sleep would come now, delicious, drowsy sleep, haunted by dreams of a young man's beauty. A gardener? Adam was a gardener. It had seemed, indeed, as if they were the first man and woman in a newly-created world as their eyes met.

The whistling in the garden had ceased. Old Barnes' successor was turning the soil with more zeal than attention to his labour. There was trouble in his heart, and a flush on his comely face not due to the hard work of digging.

CHAPTER IV

' Once on a radiant morning,
All on a summer's day,
My best-beloved set forth with me
Along the heart's highway ;
The land was filled with sunshine
Because I loved her so,
And all the world was good and fair—
But that was long ago."

KENDALL BANNING.

AT the beginning of March Miss Hannah Noble was laid up with an attack of lumbago, and Miss Johns spent much of her time in trotting between Trevena and 3, Laburnum Villas, with little luxuries in a basket and news from the outside world. She would not have afforded the luxuries for herself, and ought not to have afforded them for Miss Noble ; but it was second nature to her to give and to offer her utmost help to anybody in trouble, and she laid all the credit of it—if credit there were—to her Church teaching. In the experience of most of us, the Church, of any denomination, is more ready to receive than to give ; but Miss Johns had a general impression of " tithes and offerings," and attributed it to the rubric. Perhaps Anglicans—she was a strict Anglican—are intended to furnish the example to their Church's precepts.

Miss Noble knew well under her bushy eyebrows

that Miss Johns was making claret jelly for her regardless of expense, and buying plovers that were an unknown treat to herself. She quietly accepted them ; but if anything could have urged her tired old body to a speedier recovery, it would have been the worrying knowledge of those extravagances in her behalf.

" I've brought you a little cream blancmange that I made myself. Now you really must eat it all up ! " said Miss Johns, making the usual entrance with her basket one fair day in mid-March. It was one of those sudden pauses in the viciousness of the weather that take everybody by surprise in England. For some weeks the atmospheric conditions could only be described as vile, and would probably be the same on the morrow. But for a few hours at least it seemed as if the East wind had exhausted his animosity, the rain and sleet had been swept out of the blue heavens, and Spring had breathed upon the Earth to reassure it that she was not dead—only waiting her opportunity.

" If I eat it all I shall have a fresh attack—this time of bilious indigestion," said Miss Noble comically. She tried to raise herself in bed, and her brown, wrinkled face contracted with pain. " But I will eat it in sections. I wish you would share it with me ! "

" Cooks never eat their own handiwork," said Miss Johns gaily. She was one of those people who never feel so happy as when they are doing a kindness, and this amiable quality is not nearly so universal as is supposed. Most of us do our kindnesses with a sense of virtue that is by no means its own reward.

" I do wish you could have got out," she said regretfully, with a glance at the sunny window.

"Or at least down into your sitting-room. It is such a lovely day!"

"That is much more surprising news than anything in the paper," said Miss Noble dryly. "I have heard nothing but the sleet driving against the window for a week. And the wind was like human voices. I do not wonder at the ghostly legends of Westmoor. I have positively heard the Wish Huntsman calling to his hounds!"

"I do hate that story," said Miss Johns with a little shiver. "He hunts the souls of unchristened babies, doesn't he, across the Moor? I do not think such things ought to be said."

"But surely it is a good reason for getting the babies christened quickly, and not neglecting it!"

Miss Johns had a momentary feeling such as assailed her when talking to Gilbert Wise. She knew so well the quick, sidelong glance from his provoking eyes that went with such suggestions, that his personality was absolutely before her, and instead of answering, she laid two or three illustrated papers on Miss Noble's bed.

"I brought these, as I thought they might amuse you. Mr. Wise gave them to me. He came quite unexpectedly on Sunday."

"I like Mr. Wise," said Miss Noble gratefully. "He has rogue's eyes! But I wish he did not read the *Trumpet*. I know that it will be all pictures of munitions and trenches that might be anything else in Heaven or earth. Private Jones, with his pet rabbit in a dug-out lately occupied by Germans, and Corporal Smith receiving a Christmas pudding from the Queen, leave me quite cold!"

"To tell the truth, I never look at those War pic-

tures," Miss Johns confessed. "They do not give me the least impression of the War, and the reports in the daily papers depress me enough. Of course, I read them as a duty."

"I distrust anything one does as a duty," said Miss Noble thoughtfully. "If I read the paper, it is from purely selfish motives. I want to find out which of our liberties are to be curtailed next, and the privileges that are to be taken from us. Where were you going this beautiful spring morning?"

It was noticeable at Camp Rise that nobody talked much of the War, though the evidences of it were always at hand. But most people in the neighbourhood were working for it, and making sacrifices for it, which was a good deal better than talking. The real news, both on the War and politics, was circulated at the "Penndragon," where fine criticism might have been heard, and much shrewd sense, had the "gentry" but known it. I would rather on the whole listen to J. L. Hurder—early in the evening!—and to Farthing-faced Joe Preece, than I would to any theorists at General Templeton's table, did I want to know the conduct of affairs. Miss Noble suspected this; but if it had been pointed out to Miss Johns, she would have said: "Oh, but in a public-house! Of course they were not sober. And the General *must* know!"

"I was going up to my District," she said, in answer to Miss Noble's query. "I want to see Sarah Timms, who has been ill, like you, with lumbago, and to ask Joe Preece how his daughter is getting on."

"I hope you are not taking a second cream blanc-mange to Sarah," said Miss Noble suspiciously. "She will gobble it all up and never say 'Thank

you.' I know the creature. She chars for my landlady."

"Only a little *milk* mould—no cream in it like yours!" said Miss Johns deprecatingly. "And you really ought to be sorry for her, knowing what she suffers!"

"Well, I'm not," said Miss Noble perversely. "I hate Sarah. She mops and mows. I never knew what that phrase meant until I knew her. 'I won't deceive you, Miss,' she says. 'Why should I deceive a lady?' 'No, indeed, Sarah,' I answer. 'And, as a matter of fact, you don't deceive me!' I know perfectly well that she is telling me lies."

Miss Johns laughed a little. "At all events, you can have no objection to old Joe Preece. We all owe him a debt of gratitude for clearing the mud away. I got so splashed coming here—Mr. Hoddington passed me in his car, and the roads are dirty after the bad weather."

"It is a characteristic of Eric Hoddington to splash people with mud," said Miss Noble quietly. "It suits his mean little mind to think that he can motor past and spatter those who are on foot. And, indeed," she added thoughtfully, "it goes even deeper than that with him."

"Oh, but he did not do it intentionally," said Miss Johns, much shocked. "I do not suppose that he saw me, and he does not know me—though I saw him at the dance at the Cedars," she added, with a sense of having come quite close to an acquaintance. Miss Johns never could resist a reference to that dance through all the weeks that had followed.

"It would have made no difference if he had known you," said Miss Noble. "He rather likes being civil

to people one day if he thinks he can make them of use, and the next cutting them dead and splashing them with mud as he passes. You will find that he has a reputation for it."

It did not occur to Miss Johns to wonder where Miss Noble got her information, though she spoke with conviction, because she was thinking of the dance again. It was so pleasurable, even in retrospect, that she often took it with her to think about on dull days and tiresome errands. To-day it added to the joy of the spring morning, and accompanied her all up the road past the inn to the row of cottages in which Charley lived. The "Penndragon" was open for the mid-day sale of liquor, and the farmers gathered in the bar had evidently felt the beneficence of the weather and were rejoicing in it. As Miss Johns passed, she caught a stave of song from a dozen hearty throats:

"For we're all jolly fellows that follow the plough!"

It sounded pretty and appropriate from the inn doors, with the sunshine warming the wet earth, and Miss Johns admitted that it did not seem to be sung by drunken voices. A minute later the song changed, and a man came out of the inn still joining in the chorus:

"To be a fer-r-mer's boey—to be a fer-r-mer's boey!"

He passed Miss Johns with a touch of his cap, and then she saw that it was Joe Preece whom she had been going to see. He was a thin, elderly man, with so extraordinarily narrow a face that from his school-days he had been called "Farthing-face." It was not from him that Lottie got her looks, but from her dead mother. Miss Johns hurried after him and caught him up.

"I was coming up to your cottage to see you,

Preece. I thought you might be there in the dinner hour. I want to ask how your daughter is getting on. I hear she is at Causeway Farm."

"Well, she be getting *on* all right," said the man, scratching his head in a rather perplexed fashion. "But she du like her own way, whether she be at home or no!"

"Dear me! I hope she is a good daughter!" said Miss Johns. It struck her as a possible disagreeable duty in the future that she might have to speak to Miss Lottie Preece in the character of mentor, and her remembrance of the unruly, defiant girl made her heart sink. As a fact, Miss Johns was horribly afraid of "speaking to" anybody. She lay awake for hours the night before she scolded Minnie or Florence for carelessness, and it upset her far more than them.

"Oh, her beant so bad," said Joe Preece leniently. "But she won't stay at home, even when she be there." (This Irishism passed for what it was worth.) "Always going tu the town, and out for pleasure."

"Well, she can't do that so much now she is at work," said Miss Johns cheerfully, but an awful suspicion rose at his words. Who provided the "pleasure" that made Lottie so eager to go to West-over? She thought of Gilbert Wise as a black sheep who had pushed his way into her own private fold. "Is Mr. Hurder a good master? It is hardly the farm I should have chosen for my girl!"

"Mr. Hurder he's all right," said Joe rather resentfully. "He be the best judge of a bullock in these parts! It's the girl herself who's flighty—iss! the girl herself."

"Well, I must come up and have a talk with Lottie

one day," said Miss Johns with more assurance than she felt. "When is she at home?"

"She gets home from the milking at half-past five or six, if she *comes* home," said Joe Preece dubiously. "But if she goes walking with one of the chaps, why she won't be in till eight."

"But that is very wrong—for a girl of her age to be out with young men after dark! I will certainly come and talk to her, and you ought to insist on her being in, Preece," said Miss Johns rather desperately.

The Farthing-face shook his head. "It isn't a bit of gude talking to a woman, Miss," he said with conviction. "Some men takes a stick to 'em, and some takes a bute. But I don't du either. And talk—they won't stop fur talk! Them can du that better than we!"

Miss Johns was nonplussed. She parted with Preece at the gate of his cottage with the uncomfortable conviction that she was worsted beforehand in the encounter with Lottie, and that perhaps she had better speak to the Vicar. She had great faith in Mr. Thornhill, who was of an impressive build and manner, though, as a matter of fact, he was entirely manageable by his energetic wife. All his strength lay in his appearance, for if his parishioners did not happen to be overawed by the voluminous clerical coat and the sonorous roll of his delivery, they found nothing behind it to tackle. He would have been the first to deprecate the recalcitrant Lottie being referred to him, but Miss Johns felt him as a rock of security, doubly so in his position as Vicar and Man.

"Sometimes a man has even more influence with a girl than a woman has—particularly of Lottie's type," she thought innocently, as she entered old Sarah's cottage. It was obvious that her hostess was in bed

in the next room from the groanings and self-condolences that filtered through the door into the kitchen, and it was equally obvious that she had not washed since the lumbago attacked her, when Miss Johns entered her presence. A neighbour's daughter had been waiting on her and tending her, as Miss Johns knew, but apparently her ministrations had stopped with the making of tea and gruel and frying "a bit of bacon for her breakfast." The kitchen was untidy and unclean, for though Sarah "chared" for others, she rarely did so for herself, and Miss Johns, as District Visitor, had frequent arguments with her on the subject of home neglect. It suddenly struck her that Gilbert Wise had had some foundation for his plea for the inns as a social meeting ground, if this kind of thing were all that the husbands found at home. Old Sarah was charitably supposed to be a widow, but Miss Johns had other married cottagers in her District who were no tidier, or, if they were, it was a ferocious tidiness apt to begin at the hour when father was coming home from work, and which greeted him with soapsuds all over the floor and his wife on her knees. The "Penndragon" was clean and airy, full of social intercourse, and pleasant to the bucolic nose with the smell of beer. Where were these men to go if not to the public-house for distraction—in the country districts at least? She had seen Farthing-faced Joe and Tom Treakle-fute (another local satire) grouped loosely about the forge at times, merely for a gossip with Lillicrap the blacksmith, since they had neither horses nor ironwork with them. It was an economic problem beyond Miss Johns, and she wished that Wise had not put it into her head.

She wished, also, that Miss Noble had not used the

felicitous phrase "mop and mow" for old Sarah's servile description of her ailments with one eye on the basket. She was not a nice old woman at her ordinary avocations ; in bed she was positively repulsive.

"I could eat a bit o' that milk shape, Miss, and I won't deceive you it's the only thing as I've touched to-day, and my stomick vomiting all the time, and no 'eart nor teeth to bite with ! What I wants is a cage, but 'ooed give me the money, Miss, and I'm not deceiving you—why should I deceive a lady ?—two shillings is the most I 'ave to buy my fude, and William Hurder, that's nephew to Mr. Hurder of Causeway, he've got a beautiful new cage given him by Government, when he went to War, and John Fox he'd saved money in the bank for a cage, and he'll have it by Michaelmas. But I'm a poor old woman, and no one 'elps me but you, Miss ! "

A "cage" to the South Wessex folk means a set of false teeth, and the money for this coveted addition to faulty Nature takes some saving. Miss Johns said it was very praiseworthy of John Fox the postman to put his wages in the bank for such a purpose, and she hoped that Sarah might one day accomplish her ambition and have one likewise. But the phrase "I'm not deceiving you" recalled Miss Noble's sturdy cynicism again, and she struggled against the feeling that Sarah's greedy eyes were mentally on the Parish funds to assist her, and that the reason for the exchequer being down to two shillings was as much gin as deserving poverty. Of her utmost charity Miss Johns could find no better excuse for Sarah than "Poor old soul ! I am sure she suffers," and left her clutching at the milk blancmange with a feeling of relief that the duty visit was over.

Pshaw! how stuffy the cottage had been! how neglected the kitchen! The fresh air blowing in Miss Johns' face was a physical relief as she walked home, and she wished that she had not yielded to Sarah's stout refusal to have a window opened.

"I am sure it would have done her good," thought Miss Johns. "And the sun, too. What a beautiful day! How glad we shall be when the Spring really comes!"

Other people found the day too good to spend indoors, as soon as duty released them. Primrose Templeton was busy in the dairy during the morning, for Lady Gracia liked old-fashioned virtues, and thought her daughter ought to learn a few useful accomplishments which she was never likely to use. So Primrose could make butter and scald cream—at least, she knew how both these things were done and had watched the process—and with her sleeves rolled up and a very large overall to keep her tidy, she had even milked the gentlest of the South Ham cows in the Meary herd. There was cream to pack up for the hospital, and eggs for the Convalescent Home, and Miss Templeton glanced out of the dairy a little wistfully at the evanescent sunshine flooding the pasture lands. But the sun still shone after lunch, and as it was necessary for a young lady to have air and exercise, she was free to put on her habit and go for a ride on Meary Down under escort of the coachman she had mentioned to Wise. She had not been able to ride much of late owing to the weather, but her horse had been carefully exercised and the ride threatened no adventures. Lady Gracia came out on the doorstep to see her start, and kissed her smooth, dutiful cheek.

“ You will enjoy your ride, my darling, it is such a lovely afternoon,” she said. “ But don’t be late for tea, and don’t ride over on the West Brook side, as it will be heavy with the rains.”

“ Oh, no, Mamma ! ”

The black horse was a thorough ladies’ hack, well bred, perfect in manners, and good-looking enough even for the Squire’s daughter. There was a turf ride through the park, and Primrose cantered steadily along it, enjoying the sunshine and the softer air and the exercise, while the coachman on his neat cob trotted soberly behind her. Sometimes she wished a little wistfully that she had had sisters or brothers to ride with her, or that the big houses of the neighbourhood were not so far off as to make companionship difficult. But then Mamma would not have liked her going off on some wild excursion with the Medlicotts ; the Warres did not ride, and she did not know the girls at Camp very well. The Princess in the Tower was not more carefully secluded than Primrose.

Miss Templeton was as correct in her habit as in her ultra-simple day-clothes. She was not smart, Lady Gracia disliking smartness as attracting attention, and her face was a little too sober for girlhood ; but she was, after all, young, and the snare of Youth is one that even mothers cannot entirely avert. The day was so fair that she would have welcomed an adventure. If Black Beauty had pranced for sheer joy of living, she would have enjoyed it in her heart ; but he seemed too conscious of the responsibility of his burden, and fell into an easy trot as soon as they reached the bridle path that led through the plantation out on to the Down.

The path ran close inside a high wall of grey stone, overgrown with ivy and such moss as one only sees in the West, and green ferns that clung to its crannies. Outside this wall was the Down, and further on came the gate through which Miss Templeton and the coachman would pass out of the grounds of Meary House. Primrose could not see over the wall even on her horse, for the brushwood grew higher still on her side of it, and closed her in. But she was aware, from the way Black Beauty pricked his ears, that somebody or something was passing along on the Down, and was suddenly surprised by a snatch of song that came in broken cadence through the leafy screen between her and the singer:

* "The robin's on the wing again; I hear the call o' Spring again,
And fain am I to follow, lass; it calls me not in vain!
Yes, I would join the chorus; lo, the highway is before us—
But what if she, my first beloved, should call to me again?"

There is something very alluring in a voice that seems to belong to nobody, in the open air and the sunshine. The singer might have been a happy farmer's boy, so contented he seemed, or a moorsman driving in the ponies that had wintered on the Down. Only, this was an educated voice and singularly beautiful in tone and quality. If it had not been powerful Primrose would not have heard it so distinctly with the wall and the trees between; but though it was a tenor, it was full and rich, and the words were perfectly enunciated:

"The wanderlure is part o' me, and love is in the heart o' me,
And I would tread the road with you that leads beyond the
door;
I hear the cry o' laughter, and my feet would follow after—
But what if she, my first beloved, should call to me once
more?"

* This poem is from "Bypaths in Arcady," by Kendall Banning.

She touched her horse unconsciously with her heel to make him quicken his pace and reach the gate before the unknown voice had passed. As the coachman opened it for her and she rode through, another horseman came leisurely into view, riding down one of the sheep tracks—a young man in khaki on an obvious remount, whose seat, however, was by no means that of a recruit to the saddle, though he held his reins in the right hand. Primrose checked her horse as mechanically as she had urged him on, and bowed. For it was Gilbert Wise.

She felt a curious pang of disappointment and pleasure as she recognized him. Some vague hope from the magic day had promised adventure, and she had almost thought to find a fairy prince riding along outside her father's grounds to meet her—a stranger, but someone wonderful and romantic at first sight. And yet she was glad that it was Gilbert Wise! He saluted as quietly as if he had expected to meet her there, and then shook hands and put his horse alongside her own without hesitation.

"Going for a ride?" he said. "So am I. This is the first time I've been able to beg, borrow or steal a horse to get out on the Down. The M.O. has excused me physical drill, but he condemns my bridle arm, so I have to use my right. What a day!"

His expressive eyes were caressing the whole prospect of dead heather and rough grass, the gorse bushes, and the folded Moor that bounded the picture. The cultivation on its fringes coloured it red and green and brown, but the upper and further slopes were every shade of purple, fading into the dull grey of the tors. It was all so full of colour as to seem un-English, particularly in the winter. There was

no chorus of birds, or budding boughs in the plantation beyond the mossy wall, but somewhere up in the blue there was a peal of joy.

"That's the first lark I've heard!" he said, looking up to find the quivering speck.

"I heard one in February," said Primrose a little shyly. "Over the fields below the home farm. It was a quiet warm day, and the sun was out." She hesitated a moment, and as if she found an analogy, she added: "I did not know that you sang! I heard you—outside the wall."

"I can't—like that!" he said, dropping his laughing eyes from the lark to her sober face. "Was I making so much noise?"

"I thought you were singing beautifully," said Primrose, with strict adherence to truth. She was a little troubled that he should ride with her without asking permission. But she did not know how to dismiss him, and to her own surprise she did not want to.

"It's a little old trick I've got," he said carelessly. "I used to sing at my farm work in Canada." He looked at her almost with a challenge. "I was on the stage for six months once—musical things, you know," he said, almost as he had said it to Miss Johns.

Primrose felt something the same shock as the older woman had done. It sounded rather disreputable—farm work and the stage—what else had he been before he enlisted? But the unusual desire for adventure made even this a daring discovery. "I suppose it was very interesting?" she said.

"I'm not going to tell you about it, though I know

you want me to ! ” said Wise. “ It had its sordid side—but there were better things in it. We were all rather good fellows in our show, I think. I only wanted to explain what had trained my voice.”

“ You ought to sing to the soldiers, at the concerts—or in the hospitals,” said Primrose, with the habit of devoting everything to a good cause.

“ Did you like my singing ? ” he asked with apparent irrelevance.

“ Yes, I told you I thought it beautiful.”

“ Then why can't you enjoy it without trying to give it away to somebody else ? Do you always put Pegasus in harness ? ”

“ I don't think I understand you.”

“ Well, would you like to put up a Camp on the Down ? ”

“ I should be very sorry—” she said, after a minute's hesitation. “ But that is not the same——”

“ Isn't it ? But surely you love the view, and the familiar world round you and all its beauty ! ”

“ It would spoil it so to put up huts, and have the men here——” she faltered.

“ But then think how many of them would share the view with you, and how healthy the situation is ! Ought you to keep that to yourself ? ”

She was being laughed at again, but she did not resent it so fiercely.

“ There are other places that are just as healthy, without spoiling Meary Down ! ” she said in her prim fashion.

“ And there are other voices, without offering mine up on the altar of your charity ! But, as a matter of fact, I am constantly singing at concerts, and sing-songs, and I don't know what. Oh, Lord, yes ! I

thought I should get rid of that if I took a commission, and it's worse than ever."

She could afford to laugh a little. "I am afraid we press everyone into the service," she said. "It is so difficult to amuse the men."

"Let them amuse themselves. They'll do it far more to their liking than you will. You don't know the real Tommy, Miss Templeton."

"But we must do something to keep them out of the public-houses, Mr. Wise. And the poor fellows in hospital are so grateful!"

"Yes, they like the fags you give them, and they can go out and get a drink later on! Half these entertainments are got up for the people who give them. It's they who really enjoy the show. Tommy doesn't mind listening; but what he really likes is hearing his own voice. When the men get up their own sing-songs they are happy."

Primrose was ruffled and a little discomfited. She had taken the duty of cheering and serving the soldiers very seriously, and had visited hospitals and served at Huts, and helped to give soldiers teas at Meary House, and entertained them in and out of season—always from the point of view of the Young Lady fulfilling her obligation to the defenders of her country. That the Tommies also had their point of view had not occurred to her. And, indeed, Lady Gracia did not quite admit a point of view to any but landowners. Wessex is still one of the few feudal strongholds left in this century.

"Can your horse do anything but walk?" said Wise, with his usual facility for dropping from one subject straight into another.

"Pray do not let me keep you if you want to go

on faster!" said the girl stiffly. She was still a little ruffled, for he always upset the ordered outlook of her life with some new representation.

"I want you to go on, too," said Wise, with a quick comprehensive glance over the black horse. "He looks a good one. I am sure he can gallop!"

"I do not gallop much on the Down. It is rather rough going."

"Then take me somewhere where it is smoother," said Wise coolly. "I hear there are some grass rides over towards St. Mary Ope. Where is St. Mary Ope?"

"Straight in front of us—but it is some way——"

"Come along, then!" said Wise, and put his horse into a trot. Black Beauty followed and Primrose allowed him to do so, thinking that at the edge of the Down she could point out the way to the grass rides to Wise and turn back. They rode another mile or so, jogging easily over the Down, and then the tracks that he sought were visible, running smoothly up a gentle slope, as fine sward as any lawn, sheep-trimmed and green even in the winter. The Ope lay beyond, in the valley, a mile or so further. But before she could make her conventional little speech and leave him, Wise had started his horse into a canter, and without pulling at Black Beauty she could not stop him. The two horses gathered pace as they felt the springy turf beneath their feet, and in a minute or so Primrose was riding faster than the coachman had ever known her to do before, flying along beside the lean remount with the fresh wind in her face and the March sunshine dazzling her eyes. Up one smooth slope and then another—away to the left, and then again to the right—it was wonderful how Wise held

and guided his galloping horse with one hand. She did not exactly know where they were going, but the joy of it let loose in her veins made her too glad to question.

And suddenly, almost under their feet, opened out the valley, with the Ope brawling through its heart until it met the West Brook and formed a series of glad cascades that flashed white in the sunlight even from a view far up the slopes. The riders could hear the voices of the two rivers quarrelling over their great boulders, and the heart of the chasm lay so warm in the sun that it seemed to have taken on a golden hue as if drenched with light. The two horses had stopped, and Wise and Primrose sat looking over one of the beauty spots of South Wessex.

"I think we have chanced on Fairyland," said Wise whimsically. "Shall we go down there and see?"

"I am afraid I have not time—I shall have to canter back most of the way to get in to tea. But don't let me prevent your going if you have not seen it before. It is familiar to me."

She had a quaint habit of using old-fashioned words caught from her mother that he rather liked. He turned his horse with hers and smiled at her. "Having brought you to the gates of Fairyland, I'll see you back to the real world, in case anything should happen to you," he said. "Supposing you were spellbound on the Down!"

The surprising thing was that she felt as if she were spellbound, anyway, in this strange new enjoyment and freedom from restraint. Perhaps it was the companionship, to which she was unused, or the unconventional atmosphere about Gilbert Wise, that

made it impossible to treat him formally for long. Primrose, of course, put it down to his being a Canadian, since he was like no other young Englishman she had ever met. And she did not argue that he might just as likely differ from any young Canadian, since she had never met another to talk to.

They galloped their horses down the grass rides again, and then he led her, still at the canter, over Meary Down, choosing the safest tracks, as it seemed by instinct and perhaps farsight, his raw-boned, wiry horse making little of the sudden small rills and the broken ditches on the Down. Primrose had never jumped except over a hurdle in one of their own fields on a safe pony, and had not attempted to test Black Beauty over the sudden obstacles of the land they were crossing. But he proved quite equal to the occasion, and she felt a wild exhilaration to think that she was going as if across country, trusting to that daring figure in front, who was riding with one hand, and quite oblivious of the feelings of the coachman on the cob behind her. If old Simmons were scandalized, it was not his place to show it, and he wisely made a circuit that took him over the more beaten tracks and left the harum-scarum young officer who was leading his mistress astray to take the consequences.

"There's no doubt about it that he can *ride*!" he thought grimly. "And with his right hand only, too. Get across Westmoor he would, even on that screw!"

Gilbert Wise could certainly ride, and as very few men in his regiment did, though he had not advertised the accomplishment. He seemed to Primrose to stand in his stirrups, or sit down, or turn half round

in his saddle to see if she were safe, with no concern about his horse at all. His balance and grip must have been marvellous, and she would not have been surprised if he had told her that one period of his chequered career had been passed as a circus rider! As they came in sight of the old stone wall that bounded her father's ground, Wise pulled his horse into a walk, and Primrose brought Black Beauty alongside of him.

"Do you like hunting?" she asked, wondering if he had been out with the Wessex Moorland. She was not allowed to hunt, as the General had given it up, but since that wild scamper to-day, it struck her that it must be rather delightful.

"Not for girls!" he answered, with one of his most audacious glances.

The young lady coloured, but did not lose her composure. "Nor does my father," she said in that "good child" manner of hers. "But I think"—a faint reflection of her late exhilaration returning to her—"that riding with so many people together must be very exciting."

"So is a paper-chase on horseback," said Wise, with a shrug of his shoulders. "It would not be a bad thought to get up a paper-chase across Meary Down or on the Moor. Followers to be mounted, of course. And you and I would be the hares!"

She did not contradict this aspiration. It was safer to ignore it, and the expression in his eyes, the while she reminded herself that he looked like that at anyone or anything—at Tina Medlicott or Miss Johns, or at Meary Down. But she sighed a little as she passed through the gate into the safe confines wherein her life was spent, and the sound of his voice floated

back to her from beyond the wall as he rode away singing :

“ Yes, I will follow you, my lass, around the world or through, my lass,

To seek the peace o' summer noons that broods beside the sea.
We'll leave the past behind us, that the joy o' life may find us—
But what if she, my first beloved, should call again to me ? ”

Who was his “ first beloved,” she wondered ? On what girl had those fickle, flattering eyes rested with real tenderness and truth ? It might be long ago, and but one of a hundred to follow. But she felt raw and inexperienced, a creature but half developed, in comparison to the suspected glimpse of his life that she had gained. He must have ridden with so many women, and laughed at them, and teased them—ay ! and brought them to the gates of Fairyland, too, to be so practised. And she was only Primrose Day Templeton, of some consequence in one small corner of the world—a few acres of land in a small county in a small island—while all the world went on outside ignoring her insignificance. She wanted to go out into that gay world, and adventure like a man, instead of which, here she was riding home in time for tea because Mamma had wished it !

Poor Primrose Day ! She heard the gate into her father's grounds close on the hour of her liberty, and it seemed as if Fairyland receded out of sight for ever with that tenor voice dying into distance :

“ But what if she, my first beloved, should call to me again ? ”

CHAPTER V

" Now they stop at the wayside inn, and the waggoner laughs with
the landlord's daughter,
While out of the dripping trough the horses distend their leathern
sides with water.
All through life there are wayside inns, where man may refresh
his soul with love ;
Even the lowest may quench his thirst by rivulets fed by springs
from above."

HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW.

OLD CHARLEY looked to get his first primroses in March, when the demand for long trails of variegated ivy was on the wane ; but the season was so late that even in the warm bottoms the flowers seemed reluctant to come out. January had been unusually warm, and that clump he had found in February and handed to Miss Johns was by no means the precursor of Spring. Towards the end of March it seemed as if the delayed Winter set in in earnest, and South Wessex had an unusual fall of snow that lay as if waiting for more. It was very pretty, and it looked as if somebody had sifted sugar on to the tops ; but both the farmers and Charley found their legitimate occupations interrupted, and could have done with less beauty and the bare brown earth stripped of its neat white counterpane.

The " Penndragon " was more popular than ever. There was a fire in the bar, and it was warm and cheerful inside after a long drive or tramp over the

snowy roads. Cart-drivers coming in over Meary Down from the moorland villages were thankful to stop and thaw their stiff hands that would hardly hold the reins, and the horses, with a rug thrown over the rough quarters, stood with their backs to the wind and eased a tired leg, or welcomed the nosebag. The sights and sounds of a country inn on a moorland road are amongst the most cheerful and picturesque that are left to the country. During the brief hours when the "Penndragon" was open "for the sale of intoxicating liquor" two or three carts were sure to be tied up in the angle formed by the stables and the house, or a great hay waggon carrying Army forage, or even a motor-car, though these were fewer and farther between. Big, red-faced men came in and out of the swing doors, looking the better for their glass of ale or nip of gin—the quality was poor enough, since Government had had to do with the stuff!—and called greetings or farewells to each other as they came or went. When Mine Host of the "'Dragon" called "Time, gentlemen!" and they had to turn out into the cold again, not one of them but had some bit of gossip to think about, and his blood circulating more freely.

And though the doors of the "'Dragon" closed with the closing of the bar, it was never really shut all day. When there was a sale of grass in the neighbourhood the auctioneer and some of the farmers would be sure to lunch there, or to have tea, and, indeed, it was rarely that there were not two or three teas going in the afternoon, and sometimes hot coffee in the morning before the bar opened. Camp Rise and Ducketts and St. Mary Ope would have been poor without their "'Dragon" on the way to West-

over, for the local inn is the poor man's club just as much as the Wessex County with its comfortable building in the town was the club of the "Gentry."

Charley came in out of the snowy roadway one afternoon about six o'clock, and slipped into the corner near the fire, setting his empty basket on the floor beside him. He had been into Westover with some moss and ivy, and had tramped out again five miles in the cold—and he was sixty-seven. His own cottage was not half a mile further up the road, but there would be no fire in the grate until his old hands had laid and lighted it, for his laundress landladies were busy to-day with their ironing. The temptation of rest and warmth was irresistible, and he settled himself in his corner with a sigh of relief, too tired to drink the beer he had ordered, and holding the tumbler between numbed fingers. It was seldom that Charley could afford a glass of beer in this second year of the War, since it had gone up in price from twopence to fourpence, and twopence represented a serious item of income to him.

The inn had only just opened, and there was no one present save himself and two soldiers who had entered with him; but a minute later J. L. Hurder appeared from the house and entered the bar, like a wolf into the fold, from the wrong side. He had been doing some business with Mine Host, and had stayed on until the welcome hour when the bar should be open. The louder tones of his voice coming down the passage carried on his conversation into the haven where he would have been this hour past.

"—taking the men from the land, and asking the fur-r-mer to grow more crops. And who's to do the work? Tell me that? Iss fey! They took my son

George this last Summer and left me with thirty cows to milk."

"Well, you managed to get hands, didn't you?" said Mine Host, busy about the soldiers' orders.

"A few women—no gude for work on the farm after milking. That girl of Preece's, she's out of the shippen a'most before the last cow's dry. Don't even lend a hand to scrub the pails."

Two other farmers had entered, on their way out to moorland homesteads, and the driver of a heavy dray on its way to Westover. Most of them knew each other and greeted heartily: "How's yourself?" "Middling. Not seen *yu* in these parts for many a day!" "Well, Mr. Hurder, this is pretty weather for the spring sowing!" But there were grades of quality even here, where the farmers looked a trifle askance at the soldiers as strangers to the bar—much as an old habitu   at the Wessex County Club, a Hod-dington, or a Warre, or a Penndragon, might look at a new member. Nobody spoke to old Charley, for he was almost a tramp compared to the cart drivers, and he sat silent in his corner, so drugged with the warmth and comfort of the fire that he was nearly dozing.

One of the farmers turned to J. L. Hurder, his slow West-Country mind going back to that gentleman's stricture on his milkmaid.

"Is that Preece you mentioned Preece of West Bridge? I seem to remember as he had girls."

"No—it's Joe Preece's daughter—Joe Preece who carts the dirt—Farthing-face they call him here. And it's a pity he can't cart his girl along with the other rubbish. She's after no gude, running off tu the town to meet a man."

It was so probable that Mr. Hurder's own advances had been rebuffed by the scornful Lottie that a sly smile went round the bar, whose occupants had been further reinforced by Fox, the old postman—he who was banking his savings to buy a “cage” of false teeth—and another carter. The ale was warming Hurder's veins and loosening his tongue, and he did not recognize his own transparency.

“When she comes to what she's earned I'll turn her off. I'll have no bad girls at Causeway. I'm J. L. Hurder, of Causeway Farm, poor but honest. Never told a lie and never will do!”

“Come now, Mr. Hurder, I'm sure you won't condemn a girl before she's done summat,” said one of the farmers good-naturedly. “And if it's only running off to the town and meeting her sweetheart, why all girls du that!”

“Yes, all girls du that!” chorused the listening audience.

“And he may be going to marry her, fair and above board!” suggested the drayman.

Hurder snorted. “She's in no haste to marry,” he asserted. “Why, she was walking out with Will Copleigh, who's gardener to the Warren, at one time.” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder, to indicate the geographical position of the Warren, locating it somewhere upon Heaven's Tor. “And now she's given him the go-by for this new fancy marn of hers.”

“Who be he?” inquired the postman with some curiosity.

“I won't name no names,” said J. L. Hurder, with the solemnity of the ale in him. “But 'tis someone as likes better to meet her in Westover than to be seen with her here.”

As a matter of fact, Mr. Hurder had not the least idea who the man was who was luring Lottie Preece into Westover, and his own piqued curiosity was all the keener in consequence. The one person who could have informed the audience was the one least heeded or thought of—old Charley, sitting in his corner by the fire and listening drowsily to the gossip. Charley had met Lottie Preece by chance in Westover with somebody who he recognized as well as the girl; but he was a man of silent habits, and had not even made mischief by gossiping to Lottie's father. He knew that Farthing-faced Joe had no control of his wilful handsome daughter, and that to warn him of dangers that might not exist would only be to hasten disaster. He turned his old pipe in his mouth and meditated, listening to the gossip which he was not asked to join.

"That young Copleigh, now," said the postman, starting on a side issue. "He's a well-looking young chap. Saw him last munt coming out tu the Warren whistling like a bird, as if he'd not a care in the world."

"Doesn't mind losing the girl, it seems!" said the carter with a chuckle.

"Got another, maybe!" chimed in the drayman, laughing.

Again Charley could have confirmed the speculation. He had gone in by the back way to the Warren on a day last week, to the servants' quarters, as he had a right to do with his wares. One of the housemaids had a death in her family, and wanted to make a wreath for the grave, and had met Charley in the road and asked him to bring her some moss and ivy for a foundation. Charley, carrying his humble basket through the byways of the shrubbery, had

come upon Copleigh the gardener talking to a girl—but it was not one of the housemaids. They were standing together under the dark rhododendrons, the girl looking into the man's beautiful face that was half fascinated and half bashful, and they were so absorbed that they did not see the old man turn aside into a little path that led him round to the back door of the Warren. Well, there was no reason why one of the young ladies should not have been talking to the gardener, even though he was so handsome. She might have been giving him some instructions. But though Charley was an old man, he knew that the pair were not then as mistress and servant; he knew what youth and beauty meant gazing startled at each other even across a social gulf. This was the unspoken, unauthorized reason why Will Copleigh was not cast down at his sweetheart's defection, and why he had whistled like a blackbird when Fox had met him on the road—the unconscious call of the blackbird to his mate.

The talk in the bar shifted to politics as in any other club, and to sport, and the War—more especially the blunders of organization in England rather than those at the Front. For the shrewd men sitting there knew more than most wherein the War Office had made a muddle of things, and of the waste of public money, and of the well-meant efforts of agricultural theorists thwarted by the Military, and the Military thwarted by the Board of Agriculture. These two powers seemed for ever pulling different ways in the country districts. The Army would take no advice from those who knew the land, but went its stiff-necked way, planting camps where supplies were most difficult to transport, sending horses away from embarka-

tion centres, and then sending for them back after the lines had been completed and acres of pasture land cut up and rendered useless. The Army in England had never been of so much importance before, and in the earlier and middle stages of the War the population learned something of what was meant by militarism. Then came the agriculturalists, imploring the farmers to get more land under cultivation while that already stocked was being taken away, promising rashly that their men should not be taken, devising a dozen impracticable schemes for planting crops where crops would not grow. The stolid, hopeless common-sense of the critics in the bar made each fresh instance of red tape and food supply seem ludicrous.

After a while old Charley rose, and slinging his basket made his way out of the bar. Perhaps he swayed a little, for he was sleepy, but he was not drunk on his single glass of poor beer, though several of the farmers and carters, a trifle lively with their own liquor, said that he was. As he went he could hear Mr. Hurder at his own formula about his identity, and something more about girls who were no gude being turned away from Causeway if he found them out at it.

"Poor little girl!" said old Charley softly, as he trudged into the snowy night. He had played with Lottie Preece when she was a child.

One wonders what Charley's ambitions had been, and if he had any snobbish aspirations towards those above him in station even in the bar. Perhaps the best he hoped was that he might die in his own cold little room, on a day when the cottage was not full of steam from the copper, and not in the Westover Infirmary. If he had ever raised his patient eyes to

look upward it must have been long ago ; but if they were no longer full of hope they had not lost the far-sight of pity.

“ Poor little girl ! ” said Charley, thinking of J. L. Hurder and his self-righteous threats. It was the first gentle comment that had been made on Lottie Preece.

CHAPTER VI

"Standing, with reluctant feet,
Where the brook and river meet,
Womanhood and childhood fleet.

"O thou child of many prayers!
Life hath quicksands,—Life hath snares!
Care and age come unawares."

HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW.

LADY GRACIA'S daughter had been born on the nineteenth of April, twenty-one years ago. Knowing Gracia Templeton of old, her family had written her six separate letters imploring her not to hamper the child with a sentimental or ridiculous name, whereby they wasted six postage stamps and some stationery.

"It has been given me," said Lady Gracia solemnly, as if she had received the archangel Gabriel at least, "that she shall be called Primrose Day."

The family gasped and sat down in despair, hoping that the baby might be known as Primrose only. So Primrose Day she was christened, and her mother, in her most devoted moments, sometimes called her Primrose Day, or Day, though to the world at large she was Primrose.

Miss Templeton's coming of age was not to be celebrated with any ceremony owing to the War. Had

things been normal, there would have been a ball at Meary House, and all the County would have come to it, from Wessex Castle out to Wessex town; and, later on, something for the tenantry at which the young lady would have been presented to them afresh as someone with a new personality in her just assumed responsibilities. For Lady Gracia took her daughter very seriously, and made this coming of age almost as solemn an event as her confirmation had been. The General did not preach, but he did most of the petting. His part of the birthday honours was to present his daughter with a string of pearls for her white throat—old family heirlooms, since Lady Gracia deprecated the spending of money on new jewellery in War-time—and to inform her that she was her own mistress and would manage her own affairs for the future. Primrose Day had five hundred a year in her own right to spend as she would when she was twenty-one. It had been left to her by her grandmother, the Countess of Cornwall, rather to Lady Gracia's disapproval. She did not like independence in daughters. But the girl was so docile that it really did not matter, and her expenditure would certainly be governed by her parents' advice. As a fact, this "taking over her own affairs" was a farce, for Primrose had been taught to manage her very modest dress allowance from the time she was seventeen, with a view to her realizing the value of money and becoming capable of dealing with it by the time she came of age.

There were to be no ceremonies at Meary House—the young lady did not herself wish it, of course, in the serious times she lived in—but there would be an informal and rather large dinner-party, wherein most

of the guests were supposed to be young and to belong to the neighbourhood. But the young people of the neighbourhood either lived too far off, or were hardly on such intimate terms as warranted their inclusion in a family dinner, and the list gradually resolved itself into relations, most of them the General's and Lady Gracia's contemporaries, with one or two young men from the County as unavoidable adjuncts. Eric Hoddington was one of these, though he was not specially favoured by Lady Gracia; but she had recognized his existence from a child, and knew all about him. At least, she knew all that a mother ever does know, or thinks she needs to know.

Primrose had herself looked over the list, and had accepted it passively as inevitable.

"We have not been able to ask any of the girls hereabouts, have we?" said Lady Gracia, leaning on her daughter's slight shoulder. "It seems a pity—but the Warres are so impossible, and I hardly think you would care to have Miss Tina Medlicott or her sister to a family party like this, dear!"

"I do not know them very well, do I?" said Primrose in a non-committal tone. "They seem very popular."

"Popular! With whom? The young men who go to the Manor? Most girls are popular in a sense if they are high-spirited and noisy enough." She was resentfully conscious, as she spoke, that her daughter could never be either the one or the other. "I do not think we need consider such popularity."

Primrose was silent for a minute, scanning the list. The shoulder on which her mother leaned did not even quiver, but she drew a slow breath as if stirred by some unusual effort.

"I should like—" she said, paused, and added "to have primroses on the dining-table if the season is advanced enough."

Possibly that had not been the original ending of her sentence, but Lady Gracia grabbed at it. "Of course," she said at once, "I shall send the maids primrosing the day before—they will enjoy it. We will have a bank of moss down the table, and the flowers as if they were growing in it."

"I am afraid they will be rather scarce. The Spring has been so late—and so cold," said Primrose Day.

"There must be plenty in a week or so in the warm corners of the park."

The Spring had indeed been remarkably late for South Wessex. The middle and end of March had been white with snow, and the winds at the beginning of April simply fiendish. The nineteenth of April really seemed the culmination of their biting force, and the big rooms at Meary required big fires to keep them even comfortably warm. But the primroses had been obtained, though not in the most sheltered hollows of the park, and lifted their pathetic woodland faces to the shaded electric light as if they wondered what cruel new sun was shining on their last sad hours. They had been brought to Meary as by a miracle, and they came in for a good deal of comment and admiration from the guests present.

"We were in despair," laughed Lady Gracia, "for the supply from our own grounds was most inadequate. The flowers were poor and small, so nipped by winds and burnt for lack of shade. Primrose and I were horribly disappointed with the supply the servants brought, weren't we, Primrose?"

"Yes, Mamma," said the heroine of the evening quietly.

"When lo and behold an old man with a basket arrived from nowhere! Such a queer old fellow, looking like Rip Van Winkle. I never saw him before, but the maids tell me he sometimes brings blackberries in the autumn. His basket was crammed with the most beautiful primroses and moss. He said he got them—where was it, Primrose?"

"In the West Brook woods, Mamma. I suppose it is more sheltered there."

"Yes, that was it. He said that one of the young officers from Camp had met him on the Down and told him that we were wanting the flowers—very nice of him to think of it, wasn't it?"

Eric Hoddington, sitting next to Primrose as a concession to youth (he was the only man under forty available), looked up rather sharply.

"Who was he?" he said.

"I don't remember. But Primrose knows Primrose, who was our god from the machine?"

"It was Mr. Wise, Mamma. I met him riding on the Down, and told him of our difficulty."

"Oh, that fellow Wise," said Hoddington carelessly. "The great bridge player!"

"Does he play bridge?" asked the General, with the interest of the unexpert. He was the worst player in the Wessex County Club, and loved it best.

"I believe he is the crack player at Camp," said Eric lightly. "Rather too good, if all accounts speak truly. I should be sorry to sit down to auction with him!"

"You don't mean that he cheats?" asked a middle-aged cousin of Lady Gracia's with strong disapproval.

"Oh, *I* don't mean anything!" laughed Eric. He was as skilful at splashing mental mud on people's characters as he was on their bodies with his car. "He may be a brilliant player, but he has an advantage over other men who are not in such constant practice."

"I think it so wrong to allow gambling amongst young officers," said the cousin, turning to her neighbour. "And one man who is known for that sort of thing in a Mess influences all the others. The Colonel ought to stop it."

"For my part, I never can understand a man being a gambler," said Eric with candid virtue. "I suppose it doesn't attract me."

"But you do not know that Mr. Wise is a gambler. You only know that he plays bridge well."

The little cool voice at his side made Hoddington turn to Primrose with momentary amazement. It was so unprecedented that she should originate a defence that it caught his attention. She had been talking, it is true, as a well-bred girl must at a dinner table, but only about the War and our Splendid Soldiers (on which she was conventionally enthusiastic), and our personal Duty to the Country (on which she was didactic), and the long Winter (on which she was submissive as a trial sent by Providence). Her defence of Wise was somehow in a different tone, though her voice was as perfectly level as it was trained to be. It was the first real feeling she had shown, and though he only sensed it, he knew that she was angry—not indignant as she would have been about the crimes of

Germany, but very angry, with the still, curbed anger of a woman.

"Oh, no, *I* don't know anything about the fellow," he said, still lightly but watching her curiously. "I've hardly spoken to him." There was a veiled slight in this. "I believe he's half engaged to Tina Medlicott, but I daresay it will come to nothing. She has been engaged before!" He laughed again.

"And you have probably no more authority for saying that," said Primrose coldly.

Her cool thrust found the weak joint in Eric's armour. He frequently spoke with no authority, but a habit of making mischief, and it was seldom or never brought home to him. There was a suspicion of contempt in Primrose's tone, and in her soft, misty eyes that hardly glanced his way.

"No," he said with apparent good-humour, "I don't know that I have; but when a girl tells you that she wants to kiss a man, as Tina said to me about Wise at that dance at the Cedars, one may charitably suppose that she will have some good reason before she does it!" He had lowered his voice sufficiently not to be heard through the general buzz of conversation and his light tone was half apologetic. There was no change in Miss Templeton's self-possessed face, except that a little colour crept into her pale cheeks as if his conversation with Miss Medlicott jarred on her slightly. And, indeed, it was in questionable taste. She said: "I dislike gossip. And if Miss Medlicott is a friend of yours, it is very unfair to repeat such things of her. It must have been said to you in confidence."

Tina's reckless passing remark had certainly not been made in confidence, and would have been said

to anyone as well as Eric Hoddington. But he accepted the snub as if he had deserved it, and left Primrose to talk to her dinner partner until the moment after dinner when her health was drunk. Then the General made a little speech, which was rather touching because perfectly simple and sincere, toasting "My dear daughter" on her coming of age, and there was much clinking of glasses, and "My love to you, Primrose!" from the relatives, under cover of which Hoddington turned to her again with an air of ingenuous regret.

"Primrose, please touch glasses with me, and accept my congratulations," he said. "I am so sorry to have vexed you with my stupid gossip. I suppose flirtation is vulgar, but one gets into a careless way of looking at such things."

She touched his glass with hers in tacit acceptance of his apology, though she made no further comment, and seemed to recover her usual manner, for a few minutes later she spoke with her primmest censure of a new car whose beauties he described to her.

"I do not think it is right to spend money on cars during the War," she said. "We have given up ours, and Papa says that if it goes on into next year he shall give up the carriages, as the men will have to go. I certainly should not buy a new one."

"This was ordered before the War, unfortunately," said Eric quickly, with a lightning review of the probabilities. "They have been all this time delivering it on account of Government contracts, and as it was built on our own lines we couldn't very well throw it back on the firm's hands. You really must come and try her one day! She is as easy to drive as a baby carriage."

"I cannot drive a car."

"I could teach you in one lesson. You needn't know anything about the engine, or the dirty part of it."

But Primrose did not wax enthusiastic over the offer, or seem aware that she was being paid a compliment, and perhaps it enhanced her value in Eric's eyes. He had never thought seriously about Primrose Templeton before to-night, for her surroundings and upbringing had been things to ridicule rather than tolerate, to his mind. Eric had been the most eligible bachelor in his own circle for as long as he could remember, and had no idea of being "caught" yet awhile. The Templetons were a little out of his sphere, and a rung higher on the social ladder; but a consummate conceit made him very sure of himself if he cast his eyes in the direction of Lady Gracia's ewe lamb. She was very pretty to-night, in a highly refined and rather uninteresting style, and the white silk gown with its swansdown trimming, and the family pearls, became her. Eric was astute enough to know that there would be certain advantages in marrying Miss Templeton of Meary House; and there was an added reason to his sudden consideration of her in her suspected interest in another man. Even if he did not want her for himself, he would have done his best to prejudice her against Wise, and what was more to the point, to prejudice her people. Eric was an instinctive spoilsport, and had a facility for fouling another bird's nest, even though he had no use for it. He was not so much mischievous as ill-natured, but he disguised his characteristics beneath a careless manner and that light laugh.

Before he left Meary House that night he had

drawn a half-reluctant consent from Lady Gracia to come over to Ducketts and see the old Satsuma vases that his father had just added to his collection.

"Primrose wants to see my new car," he asserted, the young lady being out of hearing. "Do let me drive you over! I know you have put down your own, and it's a long way for the carriage."

"I say, Eric," broke in the General, "I hear your father gave something like two thousand for those vases at Christy's. Is it true?"

"I daresay," said Eric indifferently. "I never check the Governor's accounts, or I might feel called upon to remonstrate!"

"I wish I could afford two thousand to spend on my pedigree herd," grumbled the General. "However does he do it in War-time?"

"We say it is the small accounts that do it!" said Eric with his light laugh. "It's the tradesmen and the farmers who keep us going with their little deposits."

"Ah! it's well to be a banker!" said the General, while Lady Gracia was still debating in her own mind whether she ought to countenance the extravagance of the vases by seeing them.

"That's settled, then," said Eric before she could speak. "I shall tell my father you are coming on Thursday. Lady Gracia"—he turned back from the door with a sudden gravity and a confidential tone—"I hope you did not mind my saying what I did about that fellow Wise. I fancied Primrose was rather annoyed with me——"

"Primrose!" Lady Gracia stiffened at once. "Primrose hardly knows the man. He has been here

to call once or twice, and she met him riding on the Down, as she told you."

"Oh, yes, I know. But as he comes nere—and all that"—(Eric was an artist in innuendo)—"I suppose Primrose thought I ought to have held my tongue. But I believe he really is an awful sweep—and one doesn't know who he is."

Yes, that was true. Lady Gracia was accustomed to know who people were when they visited at her house. "The Beaulieus—oh, the Hertford Beaulieus?" "The Staddons—oh, a Staddon of Grange?" "His mother was a Gerard, of course! I remember Lady Emma before her marriage. She married a cousin of the St. Helens'"—it was all ticketed and tabulated in her memory, the while she would have lied with perfect good faith in saying that so long as people behaved properly—were all right, in fact—she always made them welcome and was glad to know them. But therein lay the test. And it was not all right to have a hidden pedigree and no vouchers. After all, who *was* Gilbert Wise?

"Does he really gamble?" she said, fixing her own honest eyes on Eric. Lady Gracia meant to be honest, and was only a self-deceiver in her unconscious snobbery. She had known Eric from a child, and there was a doubt of him in her heart.

"I believe he does!" said Eric candidly, for belief binds one to nothing. "But I don't say he has ever been caught out in anything shady. One takes the Army as it comes nowadays. All one can say is that the man is a Canadian, and has been through the ranks. Even if he does not hold quite the same code as we do, is it to be wondered at? And one feels a cad oneself for crabbing him."

If he had really felt a cad for what he had done he might have been near the truth ; but as he did not realize it in the least, he went away satisfied with his work. He had not really affected Wise's position at all, possibly because it was a matter of indifference to that young man whether Lady Gracia received him at Meary House or not, and quite positively because it was very difficult to upset Gilbert Wise or to alter his plans. The person who was to be affected was Primrose, and Eric had contrived a very bad quarter of an hour for her at some future date and a painful self-revelation.

It came about a week after her birthday, when the weather began to improve a little, and the winds relaxed their biting grip, though slowly, as if reluctant to let go of the scorched and buffeted earth. The ferns were shrivelled up in the old grey wall bounding Meary Down, and the moss looked brown and yellow instead of green. Even the ivy was pinched and black, and the ground was dry and ridged along the pony tracks on the Down. But Primrose was going for her rides again as her duties allowed her, though the low, grey skies were now misty with rain, and the soft south-west wind was full of it.

"I think you had better keep to the lanes, Primrose," said Lady Gracia. "It will be too foggy for you on the Down."

She had never before interfered with her daughter's choice of rides at least, having confidence in the old coachman's wisdom, and the young lady turned her head with a surprise that was almost suspicious in her soft eyes.

"It is pleasanter on the Down," she said slowly. "The lanes are heavy with mud after the frosts."

"Well——" Lady Gracia hesitated, for she was reluctant to "put ideas" into her daughter's head. Nevertheless, she felt that it must be said.

"If you meet any of the young officers from Camp, Primrose, I would rather they did not ride with you. Just bow and go on. You need not stop."

Miss Templeton seemed to be considering the suggestion in her most sedate fashion.

"I have never met anybody but Mr. Wise," she said. "I think he rides more than the others."

"Very likely—being a Canadian. Besides, I hear that he is on light duty on account of his arm, and he may have more time. Well, you need not speak to him."

"But would not that be rather discourteous?" said Primrose gravely. "I have always talked to him like—like anybody else—when we met. And I ought not to refuse to speak to him without good grounds." Her hesitation had been caused by the feeling that Wise had never talked to her like anybody else. It had been the strange thing about him—the thing that had made him stand out in her mind from all other young men, and that was rousing her to resistance now.

"That is all right, my dear—I have a very good reason for saying that I do not wish you to talk to him. Of course, you cannot be uncivil."

"Will you tell me your reason, Mamma?"

Now Lady Gracia had no definite reason to give. The one uppermost in her mind was Eric Hoddington's statement as to Wise's bridge playing; the one that really influenced her was his innuendo as to the young man's uncertain origin. She felt that her evidence against Wise was indefinite, and did not wish to

jeopardize her authority in those accusing young eyes that her daughter turned on her, so she fell back on her general principles.

"I don't like your riding about with any young man who likes to join you, my dear. If you had another lady with you it would be different, but Simmons is really no chaperon."

Primrose did not argue any further. She appeared to accept her mother's dictum as usual, and Lady Gracia experienced a secret relief that she had handled the difficulty successfully. The disturbance was in Primrose's mind rather than in her mother's. She was aware that she was not taking the embargo on Gilbert Wise as submissively as usual, and she began to question herself with regard to him. Why should Eric Hoddington's backbiting tongue be accepted as evidence against him? for she knew with feminine intuition who it was who had made Lady Gracia suddenly aware of *les convenances* in a chance meeting with him on the Down, and, like a woman, she resented it fiercely. Eric had laid himself out to be his most charming self when the Templetons went over to Ducketts to see Mr. Hoddington's vases, and as he could be very good company when he pleased, he really deserved a better success than he met with from Primrose. The only result, as far as Miss Templeton was concerned, was that she felt she rather disliked him, and the dislike had reached a pitch that might be called active hatred as she rode out on Meary Down on this wet April afternoon, into the soft South Wessex mist. Black Beauty was allowed to take his own pace, and almost his own way, for his rider was absorbed in an inward turmoil. It was not fair of Mamma to allow her to make friends, and then to

veto them for no reason save Eric's hateful slander—indeed, it was not! For the first time her hot little heart beat with a sense of injustice, and she passionately questioned the right of parents to mould their children's lives without any allowance for individual tastes. It seemed to Primrose suddenly that she had discovered that she had a soul, and that it was being kept in a cage by hands no less tyrannical in that they were kind.

“And I shall never be able to explain, and he will think I simply don't want to know him any more!” she thought in despair. It really did seem a tragedy, for her shy pride made it practically impossible for her to give Gilbert Wise the least hint of the cause of his sudden dismissal. Had she been Tina Medlicott or her sister there would have been no difficulty, because those high-spirited young women would certainly not have brooked interference, or if it had been thrust upon them, they would have parried it by telling Wise the whole story and entering into hostile league with him against parental authority. And Brenda Warre, no less efficiently, would have stormed her way to victory and held her own with the worst temper in her family. We all have our different methods. But Primrose had never developed one of her own.

“And perhaps he won't care—he won't even notice that he has dropped out of knowing us,” thought Primrose miserably, for in some occult fashion Gilbert Wise had untaught her the value set upon her by all her little world, and had made her humble-minded. “He will not care,” warned her heart. “Why should he? But I shall care!”

The thick rain was really like a veil upon the Down,

and the rounded shoulders of Westmoor were blotted out save in faint masses of grey upon the horizon. But those misty eyes of Primrose's were long-sighted and clear of vision. She was first aware that there was an animal moving through the mist some way off, and that it was not one of the Moor ponies who had wintered on the Down. Then she became certain that there was a rider, and that he was in khaki, and then she knew that it was a choice between her mother's behest and her own strong new inclination.

Of course, it need not be Gilbert Wise—it might be any of his brother officers from Camp, argued inclination, someone perhaps who you do not know and who therefore does not matter. It is only fair to yourself to find out before you run away. But I know who it is—I know that no other man would ride out in this fog, perhaps on the chance of meeting me, said her conscience. And Mamma believes that I agreed to do as she wished. I ought to have spoken out then and said that I must decide for myself in this one case—only I *could* not!

The colour flooded her oval childish face quite beautifully at the startling thought of asserting herself about a young man, and she put her horse into a canter and rode sternly away from that vague figure that was approaching her through the mist. The ground was soft and rather heavy, but Black Beauty knew the track and swung easily forward. If she went by the old wall, skirting her father's ground, Primrose knew that she could almost circle the Down and come home by another road. She rode soberly on, for there was no need to canter now that she had lost that other figure in the mist; but the pleasure of the day was gone, and after half an hour of it she sud-

denly turned her horse's head, to the great satisfaction of Simmons, who preferred the comfort of his own cosy cottage to this dull hack in the rain. Then, suddenly, out of the mist again, appeared that distant horseman, and with a leap of her pulses Primrose recognized that he had not given up his purpose—if it were his purpose to meet her—and had been following her for the last two miles. At her present pace he must cut her off in another half mile, and deliberately cross her path from the direction he was taking. She put her horse to the gallop, and the good beast, knowing that he was going home, answered her heel with a speed that sent the blood racing through her veins again. She did not mind running away now that she knew she was being pursued! The faint primeval instinct that prompts women to encourage the chase by flight was unconsciously urging Primrose Day to that dutiful gallop, the while she told her conscience "This is what Mamma told me to do!"

As the long grey wall came in sight the first drop in her spirits occurred. Suppose, after all, that she was too successful, and he did not catch her up! Suppose that he was huffed by her evident desire to avoid him and rode away! But there remained the shy pleasure of having been hunted, even if she evaded capture. He was out of sight now—hidden by that sudden slope of the Down to her left, while she cantered up the lower ground under the wall. Her lip quivered, and her eyes were really misty with something that was salt and sharp, so that she did not see that he had outpaced her and was waiting for her a few yards further on, until they were actually side by side.

"I've been tracking you for the last hour," he said,

pushing his horse close up to Black Beauty's side, and leaning a little forward to look at her. Something of the exhilaration of that chase seemed to have infected him also, for there was a laughing triumph in his eyes. "Why have you been running away from me?"

"How do you do?" said Primrose a little unsteadily, as if the pace had taken her breath. "I did not like the weather—it depressed me—I decided to come home."

"You decided to run away from me!" Wise repeated easily, still watching her with a new curiosity in his eyes. She was obviously disturbed, and it altered her whole face from its expressionless childish composure. "Do you mind telling me if you meant to avoid me, or if it were only a passing whim?"

He thought that her training might have awakened a tardy prudishness in her; that perhaps she had come to the conclusion that she was meeting him too often on the Down, for they had ridden together several times since that first encounter. But the distress in her face told him that it was something more, and his wits were on the alert in an instant. He had not caught her up until they were nearly at the gate in the wall, and he had no reason to detain her.

"I do not have passing whims," said Primrose with absolute truth. "I hope I did not spoil your ride, Mr. Wise. Good-bye!"

Simmons was opening the gate for her, a little in advance and out of hearing. Because it struck her that it might really be good-bye there was a catch in her breath; but she hoped he could not hear. Certainly he could not know why.

"Do you always do exactly as you are told?" he said irrelevantly; but it seemed as if he were speaking straight to her secret thought, as he so often did. "And don't you think it's a little unfair to other people sometimes when you do?"

She looked at him to see what he meant, and looked away, again confused with a sudden dreadful little thought that his face awoke in her. Why did one corner of his mouth lift more than the other in that provoking way? She wished she had not looked at him, and that he were not giving her the full benefit of his practised eyes, undistracted by any other object. What with her conscience and that dreadful little thought, she hardly knew what she was doing, and held out her hand to him in silence—though there was, of course, no occasion to shake hands at all. Wise leaned forward as he took it and spoke almost in a whisper: "You must not do as you are told this time—you must choose for yourself. We all have to do so one day. Courage! It is better to make mistakes ourselves than to let others make them for us."

Simmons was holding the gate. She turned her horse's head and walked through, leaving Wise to ride up outside the old grey wall. He did not sing to-day, and she was glad of it. That dreadful little thought had made her hot and cold by turns, and kept slipping back into her mind as fast as she thrust it out. She did not know what had come to her—she was sure that Tina Medlicott could not have conceived anything more audacious.

"The robin's on the wing again; I hear the call o' Spring again;
And fain am I to follow, lass, it calls me not in vain!
Yea, I would join the chorus; lo, the highway is before us——"

Twice during that uneventful evening Primrose Day blushed for no reason, and then went white for fear that anyone should notice it.

For the little thought that would not be banished was that she would have liked to kiss that lifted corner of his mouth while Gilbert Wise was talking to her.

CHAPTER VII

"What doth the poor man's son inherit?
A patience learned of being poor,
Courage, if sorrow comes, to bear it,
A fellow-feeling that is sure
To make the outcast bless his door;
A heritage, it seems to me,
A king might wish to hold in fee."

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL.

MR. LILICRAP was in happy mood, in spite of the weather. The mist which was making Meary Down obscure lay hardly less thickly upon the fields round about the forge and his cottage; but the glow from the forge window shone pleasantly upon the wet road, and Lillicrap himself, with his sleeves rolled over his big arms, was hammering a shoe into a nice fit for the big cart-horse waiting patiently in the shed. Camp Rise forge was not quite the usual structure of forges. The furnace and the big bellows and the anvils were inside, in what was practically a room, with a window looking on to the outside world and a door leading to the living portion of Lillicrap's dwelling-place. Probably it had once been part of the cottage—a wash-house, or the old original kitchen. From this, the forge proper, another door led into the shed where the horses were tied or held, and where Lillicrap and his assistant took off shoes and pared

the feet and fitted fading red iron to their customers. There was a heap of old horseshoes in one corner, testifying to the rate of business day after day; and the assistant, with his box of nails and tools, had just added to them by the smooth worn half circle he had stripped from the cart-horse's near hind foot.

"It's a proper mist!" said Hallam, peering out of the door, as he carried the glowing shoe into the shed. "Light's going an hour early to-night." This was the meaning that he meant to convey, and that he did convey, to his own mind; but he spoke in such broad South Wessex that to reproduce his accent would be a mystery of phonetic signs. He was a sturdy figure in shirt sleeves and apron, his hair almost white, his clear blue eyes twinkling in a fair, healthy skin. Not a young man, not even middle-aged—but with many years of work in him yet.

He drew back from the chill of the outside world with instinctive caution, for, like all smiths, he was subject to cold. The heat of the forge and his labour made him sensitive to any sudden transition, and he had not long been up from a bad chill that had driven him at length to bed. As he lifted the big foot between his knees, however, his ears were caught by an unearthly yell from somewhere down the road, and he paused in his work with one of those twinkling smiles that made his face very pleasant.

"'Tis Donkey John, as sure as I know!" he said to the assistant. "Luke out, Jack, and see if he have a load with him. We're wanting firewood."

The yell was repeated, but as it came nearer resolved itself into a repetition of names that ended in a perfect howl — "Captain — Trigger — Flo — Moss — Fanny —

Poll!”—the “Poll” sounding far along the roadway to Camp. The assistant, glancing out of the shed, saw a curious procession advancing in the mist, familiar enough, however, to Camp Rise, which called it ironically “The Camp Rise Express,” owing to its exceeding slow paces. It consisted of a low truck or barrow on which was piled a good load of brushwood, drawn by six small donkeys harnessed one in front of the other, and moving in perpetual slow time. They were meek and dejected-looking animals, and their harness was elementary to say the least, the collars being mere bundles of sacking stuffed with hay. Beside the truck walked an immense man, his stick tucked under his arm and his hands in his pockets, roaring at the donkeys at intervals, though he did not attempt to guide or touch them. They answered to his voice, and little wonder. Jonathan, or Donkey John as he was called, was not a native of those parts. He had been a sergeant in the army, and when his service was done he took to Nonconformist principles and donkeys, his qualification being the most powerful lungs in South Wessex. He preached in the open air on Saturday nights, and drew crowds to him by the mere force of his delivery; he yelled at his donkeys all the week and had never been seen to use his stick, the sound of his voice being sufficient to quell the most obstinate beast. In ordinary conversation, however, he merely spoke gruffly, and with a certain dignity.

The procession paused at the door of the shed, and Jonathan strode forward into the doorway, the assistant retreating before him.

“Good evening, Mr. Lillicrap,” he said, with an accent that sounded a marked contrast to the smith’s.

"Is there any news of the War? I've two boys at the front, and I hear nothing of them."

"The papers are all full of the rebellion in Dublin—there's no news tu the front much," said Lillicrap, sizzling the cart-horse's hoof and producing that horrible smell that haunts all smithies. "Have you got a load with you, Jonathan?"

The donkey-man nodded grimly, but lingered wistfully at the shed door. "When's this big push coming?" he said, with the technical interest of the old soldier. "When are we going to move?"

"Ah, when!" said Lillicrap cheerfully, releasing the big foot and straightening his back. "Our advance seems to be at the same rate as your donkeys, John." His blue eyes twinkled again, and he glanced at the outline of a drooping nose visible behind Jonathan's gigantic figure. "Slow and sure does it, with donkeys and men, as the generals seem to think."

"They ought to hit, and to go on hitting!" said the old soldier gloomily. "I don't understand all this trench warfare. They want big guns and more shells. Dig the rats out of their holes and keep them running!" His big chest heaved in a great sigh. "I haven't heard from my boys for a month," he said sorrowfully.

Lillicrap had no solace to offer, save a shake of the head, and diverted the conversation from its graver channel. "How's the cart getting along?" he said with a sly smile.

Donkey John had an overweening ambition to build his own carts, believing that he could do it just as well as a professional; the result being the weirdest examples of trucks and trollies ever seen since the days of chariots. He was at present supposed to be

engaged on a superstructure which he called a cart, and which was to transcend all trollies.

"Well, I made a miscalculation," he admitted, with unusual discouragement in his tone. "I built it all right in the front room of the cottage, not having space in the shed, and it turned out fine. But when we wanted to get it out of the door it was too wide! I fear I must take it to pieces again."

"Leave the wood by the forge window, Jonathan!" Lillicrap called after him, laughing, as he turned away, and a few minutes later the sound of his yell rang through the mist urging the little donkeys on with a lighter load: "Captain—Trigger—Flo—Moss—Fanny—*Poll!*" dying into distance in the direction of Camp.

Lillicrap hoped that the cart-horse was the last of his customers, and that he might close the shed and get a chance to read the evening paper that one of the soldiers had good-naturedly brought out from Camp, or to go over to the "'Dragon'" as soon as it should be open, for a chat in the bar, and to tell the story of Donkey John and his new cart; but as he glanced out of the door after Jonathan and his donkeys, his disapproving glance met that of a horseman dismounting at the shed, and he shook his head.

"Not to-night, sir! I can't see to set another shoe. I've done work for the day."

"My horse lost a shoe on the Down, galloping him through the mire," said Gilbert Wise genially, and meeting the smith's hostile glance. "If I hold the lamp, will you tinker him up so that I can get back to Camp without laming him? I don't want a bruised heel."

"He won't hurt that way on they soft roads,"

grumbled Lillicrap, stooping to the cart-horse again. He fitted and nailed the shoes himself, leaving his assistant to do the rough work. Wise led his horse into the shed, and quietly tied him up to one of the iron rings in the wall. Then when the cart-horse was shod, and Lillicrap came slowly into the forge, he was ready to blow the bellows if the smith wanted help.

"I'll put un on cold, sir—Army fashion!" he said, the twinkle coming back to his eyes. "And yu can hold t' lamp!"

"As long as you make me useful I don't care," said Gilbert Wise, taking the oil lamp that the smith lit and handed to him. He spoke lightly as usual, but his sleepy eyes were not quite so debonair as their wont. He looked as if he had seen and heard something to-day that had given him pause for thought—a thing that seldom befell him, for he was naturally given to instant decisions, most of them ruled by a certain caprice. As he stood holding the lamp by the side of his horse, he did not see the smith's work that he mechanically aided; he saw instead a pair of eyes that were misty beyond their wont with unshed tears, and a childish mouth that quivered in spite of trained reserve.

"They have made her cry," he kept on saying blankly to himself, "and it's on my account. I had no thought that this would happen. They have made her cry—they have made her cry!"

A certain impression of incredulity that was almost ludicrous had taken possession of him. He had been a little amused, and then aggravated, by a survival of Victorian training that he could not have credited if he had not met with it, and he had handled it much as one might a doll, with some curiosity as to how far

it corresponded to a human being. And quite suddenly he had been aware that this puppet felt.

"They have made her cry!" he said. A sudden rage against both the agents of those tears and against himself made him feel unusually impotent, for he was a resourceful young man at most times. But the disentangling of the skein was more complicated than most that passed through his ready hands. Perhaps it was not for him to disentangle at all. And yet he felt a humiliated participation in something as unmanly as if he had hurt a child or a small defenceless animal, in that they had made her cry.

"There! and I hope that's the last tu 'um!" said Lillicrap, letting the horse's foot go gently. "Why, Will lad, I didn't see 'ee. Du 'ee come in and go into the house."

Wise turned his head quickly as he led his horse out of the shed, and saw that a young man in working clothes was standing almost behind him, waiting until Lillicrap should be able to notice him. He was tall and rather loosely made, with such a singularly handsome face that Wise looked at him with a sense of generous envy. He knew the value of his own good looks, but they were, after all, dependent upon a trick of the mouth and eyes, and some charm in him for feminine human nature. The young man standing just inside the shed was triumphantly handsome—almost beautiful—in soil-stained corduroy, and would have been so for men and women alike under any circumstances.

"Lucky beggar!" said Wise to himself impartially. "Who's that, Lillicrap?" he said, as the smith came to close the shed door behind him in the face of further custom.

"My nephew, sir — William Copleigh, gardener down tu the Warren." Lillicrap looked beyond the young officer into the dull road, and raised his hand in acknowledgment of a motor-car flashing by into the darkening evening. The mud splashed up from its wheels and spattered him as it did so ; but he looked after Eric Hoddington with a certain respect and satisfaction, none the less. Hoddington's was his bank, and held the savings of long years of hard work and self-denial. Lillicrap had no son to come after him in the forge, and since the War had had to take double work on his broad shoulders, for his assistant was but a lad. But he looked forward to a time in the near future when those savings should go to the purchase of his cottage and the bit of land round it as his own property, and he did not fear old age. He had worked for this all his life, and he had a right to it. Lord Wessex was his landlord, and would not be hard on him. Eric might splash as he pleased, since he represented the custody of Lillcrap's life and its purpose, and carried the honour of the County in his name. Even Lillicrap's sturdy independence owned a certain feudal allegiance to these people, to whom he had looked up all his life as beings belonging to another sphere.

Will Copleigh had walked quietly into the cottage, and was sitting by the round table talking to Mrs. Lillicrap when the smith entered after closing the forge. There was tea and bacon on the table, bread and butter and jam, for cottagers in South Wessex take their evening meal soon after daylight closes. Mrs. Lillicrap had not yet lighted the lamp, but she had stirred the fire instead, and the light flickered on her own grey hair and print gown, and on Will's

beautiful, absent-minded face, as he stirred his tea. He looked "strayed," as the Wessex folk say, and his wide-open blue eyes were almost moony with some inward experience.

"Looks homelike!" said Lillicrap with satisfaction, as he came in. He felt a little glow, warmer than the fire's, to think that his home would some day really be his. And no great landowner, clearing his estate of mortgage, or acquiring new miles of hill and dale, had a better right than Lillicrap to his cottage and garden plot, or had looked forward more tenaciously to obtaining it. The years of a man's life drop behind him noiselessly, full of a purpose which only makes them audible in its accomplishment.

"Well, an' what's t'news?" said the smith, seating himself and making hearty inroads on the bacon. "Why, marn, you're half asleep! The Moor fog has got into your brains."

Will roused himself with a flush in his burnt face. He was fair-skinned, but constant exposure to weather had given him a healthy red and brown even in the winter.

"I came up to tell you that I'm afraid I shall have to join up, Uncle," he said with a half-impatient sigh. The War, that broke the thread of so much, was threatening the most vivid phase of his life. It was just as if he had suddenly become aware of being in a country of brilliant colours—colours never seen before in earth or sky—and on the horizon appeared the war-clouds, rolling up to blot out the picture.

"Do 'ee now!" said Lillicrap, pausing with the bacon on the fork half-way to his mouth, and looking from his wife to Will with dismayed sympathy. Hitherto young Copleigh had been exempt because of

his mother's dependence upon him ; but the need for men was increasing, and the classes were being called up for training.

"That's bad!" said Mrs. Lillicrap kindly in her turn. "How will Mother manage without 'ee, Will?"

"I don't know," said the young man with unwonted despondence, for, as a rule, his face shone with good health and good-humour, and he was always ready to laugh. His enlistment seemed to have depressed him unduly. "I suppose there will be some separation allowance?"

"Well, 'tis better 'an if you'd been married," said Lillicrap with dubious comfort. "When we hears of the children left, and the young widows, it's enough to make us curse the War. But yu be leaving your mother, and that's enough—not even a sweetheart, be there, Will?" His blue eyes twinkled, and he looked with passing wonder at his nephew's flushed, handsome face.

"How's that girl Lottie?" asked Mrs. Lillicrap, with some suspicion in her tone. She had never approved of the dark-browed, sullen school-girl, with her fine eyes and off-hand ways. Besides, she was only the daughter of Farthing-faced Joe, and the Lillicraps were respected as folks with a bit put by. There is class and class. But young men are caught by fine eyes, and Will had certainly "walked out" with Lottie after she left school.

"Lottie Preece is no sweetheart of mine," said Will somewhat hastily. "I hear she's walking with a soldier from Camp—I don't know if it's true."

"That's the worst of them black-brows!" said

Mrs. Lillicrap with conviction. "'Tis something in the colour. The dark girls run to no gude."

"I didn't quarrel with her looks," said Will, with a sudden fire in his blue eyes. "A girl's all the prettier for dark hair and eyes if her skin's fair."

"You're no worse off for the lack of her, anyway," said Mrs. Lillicrap obstinately. "Have another cup of tea, and put some o' that ream in it. Mr. Hurder doesn't scald his milk, and it's so thick in ream I skimmed it."

In South Wessex it is only the scalded cream that is "cream"; the raw cream that one buys in other counties is "ream," and lightly regarded. Will stirred the rich skim of Mr. Hurder's milk into his tea absently, and drank it in silence with the stolidity of an open-air palate, but his comely face was still more sober than its wont.

"And how's the Warren to du for a gardener if you have to go?" asked Lillicrap with genial curiosity. "Will they have old Barnes back? How du Mrs. Warre take it?"

"She be a gude deal put out," Will admitted, with that uneasy flush. "She be trying to get me off."

"It's bad for the gentry to keep up the gardens or the parks now, with their men all taken. Mrs. Warre will show her temper over this?" Lillicrap's eyes twinkled again.

"Yes, I think," said Will simply.

"They are all mad with their temper," said Mrs. Lillicrap. "Crooked mind or crooked body, we say of the Warres. I see Miss Kathleen drive past in their cart yesterday, and she gets more hump-backed every time I set eyes on her. My! but her hair's a sight, too! Have Mr. Leofric been home of late?"

"No, there's no one tu the Warren but Mrs. Warre and the young ladies."

"He's tried to shoot himself twice, so I heard," said Lillicrap. "Third time'll du it, maybe. And Miss Brenda, she's a straight body, and they said she was to marry Lady Penndragon's son, but nothing came of it."

"Maybe he found out as her mind were crooked, like all the rest," said Mrs. Lillicrap. "She's another of these dark girls, with their high ways and tempers."

Will pushed his chair back and rose rather abruptly. "Well, I must be getting home, or mother will be missing me," he said. "Thought I'd like to come in and tell 'ee about the joining up, Uncle, in case I might be going suddent. Yu'll luke a bit to mother if I du, maybe."

"Don't you worry, marn," said Lillicrap good-naturedly. "The missus and I will lend a hand for Polly." He felt how good a thing it was to have saved money, and to have it in the bank, knowing himself a man of substance and able to help his sister if her son had to join up. It was one of the rewards of those long years of patience and self-denial that had seemed a bit barren to him as a younger man. "Have Elford cleared that mortgage off his land yet? He live nearer you nor me."

"Not yet," said the young gardener, as he pulled his cap over his curly hair and swung out through the forge. "He's reckoning to finish it next quarter, though."

"And about time, for the lawyers don't like waiting. Elford's bin shouldering that mortagage for years. This War's helped him with the price of cattle going up."

He followed his nephew through the forge and glanced across the road, where the "Dragon" had opened its doors and sent a shaded glare into the misty evening. From the bar came the voice of Mr. Hurder, already embarked on his favourite declaration :

"I'm J. L. Hurder, of Causeway Farm, poor but honest. Never told a lie and never will do. And Thomas Partridge, he sold my horse over tu the Crown at Weststock, and he didn't oughter."

"Mr. Hurder's on the horse tale to-night," said Lillicrap with a chuckle. "Maybe I'll go over to the bar and smoke a pipe with 'em. I'd like to know what Elford made by those last bullocks of his."

The bullocks were fat cows, but that was a detail. As every animal is "he" in South Wessex except a tom cat, so all cattle are bullocks except the bull, who is spoken of as "she" as like as not. Mr. Lillcrap strolled across the road to hear the price of Mr. Elford's deal, which should swell his deposit at Hoddington's and clear his mortgaged land, and Will Copleigh walked off down the wet road whistling an unusual air for his class. It was not "The Farmer's Boy," or "We're all jolly fellows that follow the plough," it was a modern ballad that was becoming popular in drawing-rooms, but had hardly yet reached the streets. Possibly he had heard it when the windows of the Warren were open, and one of the Warren girls was singing, for they both had full, sweet voices :

"Dark eyes that lead my thoughts astray,
What have you done ? What have you done ?
I can no longer love or pray——"

CHAPTER VIII

“Two together !
Winds blow south, or winds blow north,
Day come white, or night come black,
Home, or rivers and mountains from home,
Singing all time, minding no time,
While we two keep together.”

WALT WHITMAN.

THE Spring had come to Meary Down.

The surface of it was still rough with coarse grass and patches of bare black where there had been swaling ; but under last year's heather the new was springing up, and tender fronds were pushing their way through the old bracken, while over all the width of it bloomed the gorse, more flowers than prickles, till one blinked with the gold and the air smelt like distilled honey, sharp and sweet. Not one but a dozen larks were rising and falling between blue heaven and white drift of clouds, and from Squire Templeton's plantations the cuckoo called all day and up to the last moment when he went to bed. For it was May.

The first part of the month had been cold and very wet, an excellent thing for the farmers, who saw their hay-crop growing almost under their eyes. Now, in mid-May, the skies had cleared and it was warm weather, an ideal English Spring such as poets usually have to write of while shivering over the fire.

Miss Templeton no longer rode in the afternoons. It was too hot before four o'clock, and Lady Gracia discountenanced her coming in at six, hot and tired before dressing for dinner. So she rose early, and was out in the morning air before half-past seven, which by "Summer-time" was really half-past six, returning to breakfast at nine. It was warm enough even then, and the young lady had a colour in her usually pale cheeks of late, ascribed to sun and exercise by her parents and guardians. Perhaps the old coachman had another opinion, but, if so, he kept it to himself. If Lady Gracia had questioned him, he could honestly have said that five days out of six they met nothing but a drover on his rough pony, or some labourer going to work across the Down; but a rose, once opening to the sun, will blush on through dull days with the memory of his warmth, and a girl can dream of the last meeting that stands out of uneventful hours with a glow like the sun's.

Five days blank, and on the sixth, as she rode over the Down in the morning, she heard the beat of another horse's feet as soon as Black Beauty, and loitered a little to allow Gilbert Wise to join her. When this had happened, she had always told Lady Gracia afterwards, with perfect truth as far as it went "I saw Mr. Wise on the Down this morning." But Lady Gracia, knowing her daughter, had taken it for granted that she had bowed and ridden away as advised, and the only comment she had made was "Tiresome young man! He seems to get more horse exercise than all of his brother officers put together."

Primrose had never volunteered any further information. If she had been asked, she could have told

the exact number of times she had met and ridden with Wise since her mother's prohibition ; but she was never asked, and, as a fact, it was not so very many. If she had weighed her acquaintance with him by meetings, or the time they had spent together, she would have been dismayed. Could she build such high hopes and joys on such a slender foundation ? How was it that it had all come to mean so much in so short a time ? She asked no definite thing of the future, and called the present by no actual name. Her thoughts were as shy as the dog violets growing under the old grey wall. She only knew that she looked forward to meeting him as she had never done to any treasured delight in her eager life, and that she was happy with the very heart of May.

It seemed to her that he almost always came when she did not expect him (for interest had taught her something of the hindrance of his duties), and it added to the charm and the wonder of meeting him. She had no anticipation of seeing him to-day, for instance, as she rode out towards St. Mary Ope with the world dancing round her in light and shadow, and the blues and greys and purples of Westmoor changing with every cloud that drifted across the morning sky. It was all so beautiful, so fresh !—but the beauty and the freshness were in her own young heart and life. She felt as if she could say her prayers out here, on horseback, between glad earth and Heaven, better than on her knees by her little white bed, and wondered at her unconventional thought, and then looked up and saw him quite close to her before she had heard his approach over the smooth sward of the grass ride.

“ Shall we go to Fairyland ? ” he said. “ We did

not get there before, you know, when we rode this way, because you would turn back at the gates ! ”

“ Do you mean to ride right down into the valley ? ” asked Primrose literally, but there was the real answer for him in her misty eyes and the faintly-smiling lips. She looked so different to-day from the first time that he had really noticed her, a little critically, behind the counter at the Hut. Then she had appeared to him as a stuck-up child with a dead-level gaze that spoilt her face. He had thought that her hair grew very prettily round her brows, and that it was the only attraction she possessed unless those eyes could hold another expression. He wanted to laugh at himself helplessly as their horses paced side by side, and he saw the young curve of her cheek and chin and a loose lock of the cloudy hair tickling it under her straw riding hat. He felt that in another moment he must reach an audacious hand and tuck the love-lock behind her ear, for he could not bear its invitation ; and then if his fingers once touched the velvet bloom of her skin . . .

“ I am going to ask your coachman to hold our horses while we walk down into the valley,” he said, with an unusual excitement in his tone. “ I want you to show me the river, and the woods down there——”

“ And Fairyland ? ” said the girl with her shy smile.

“ No—I will find the way to Fairyland, if you will let me—if you will only let me ! ”

She did not answer, and he rode by her side in silence, wondering at himself and her and his own helplessness under the spell of May. The blood came and went under her clear, stainless skin with the beating of her happy heart, and she looked with those

unconscious loving eyes into a new and exquisite world, but his own throat felt dry and parched, and the palms of his hands were moist as he held his reins mechanically.

"I have never seen such a beautiful morning!" said Primrose, with a slow wonder in her soft voice. She glanced at him half wistfully and half timidly. "Does it seem very beautiful to you too, or is it only my fancy?"

"It is not fancy—it is the most beautiful morning of our lives!" he said earnestly. "Won't you try to understand?"

How was he to tell her of this wonderful thing that was happening to them? It had taken even him by surprise, and held him captive, speechless before his fate. He looked at her innocent oval face with the mystery of life dawning in it, and he drew back, tongue-tied. It was the face of a child or such a very young girl that it seemed cruel to awaken her.

"Let us leave the horses here," he said, flinging himself impatiently out of the saddle at the top of the downward slope into the valley, from which they had turned back before. He lifted Primrose gently from her horse with one arm, and handed the reins to Simmons, by no means reluctant to sit at ease and smoke a surreptitious pipe while his charge went afoot down to the river in Wise's care.

They appeared decorous enough as they walked down the incline away from him, and with a sigh of relief old Simmons drew his beloved briar cautiously from his pocket and lit it, while all three horses nibbled luxuriously at the short turf. The recent warmth of the weather had made them a trifle slack, thinking longingly of the day when their shoes would give way

to tips and they would be turned out to grass. There was little to fear from them, and Simmons smoked on, meditating on the War news and the price of pigs. He was interested in pigs, which had been his ambition for years, and his eyes did not follow his mistress or her cavalier down into the valley, whereby he escaped responsibility on their behalf.

Half-way down the slope the greensward became steeper and promised a hard climb up again. Wise held out his hand to the girl, but without the sidelong glance she knew so well. "Will you take my hand?" he said. She dropped her little gauntleted fingers into it, and so hand in hand they walked down to the pebbly beach where the swift running stream raced on, one body of water now from the two rivers, into the winding chasm between high wooded slopes. They stood a minute watching its impatient anger amongst the mossy boulders, and then, as if by tacit consent, strolled along the bank until the woods came down to meet them and shut out the brilliance of the morning. It was all green light here under the new leafage of the trees, and under foot it was green also with moss and ferns and underbush.

"We must be careful," said Primrose, and her hand tightened ever so little on his. "Sometimes the ground is quite marshy, so many little streams run down through the wood."

He did not answer, and his face looked a little strained in the fretted light between the young leaves. They had reached higher ground above the river, and were looking down at it through the twisted heart of the wood. She turned to him in surprise at his unresponsiveness, and they stood still, their hands still joined, and looked at each other as if half afraid, while

the passion and peace of the Spring spoke mutely through the silence.

"I love you," said Wise simply. "Will you be my wife?" and found that he was trembling.

She gathered her breath for a moment, and answered if out of the heart of Nature:

"And I love you—and it is beautiful—and I will be your wife."

Youth and love do not wait to think of barriers, of ifs and buts, on a May morning in the sunshine. They spoke truth down there in the wood, and plighted troth as simply as if they were the first lovers in the first Spring that God ever created. On the slopes above them the massed trees had taken on the bloom of a grape where their boughs budded, but did not yet break, and from the tender gloom the cuckoo called and called across the river, until he was answered from the opposite slopes: "Cuckoo! cuckoo!" and fainter but no less clear, "Cuckoo! cuckoo!"

"Will you promise to let nothing come between us?" said Gilbert Wise, tucking away the little errant lock—at last! at last!—behind her small white ear; and then forgot what he had asked because of her soft face and the madness in his veins. "My darling!" he said, and half stammered. "My darling! and they made you cry!"

But she answered with a sudden strength that made him marvel:

"I will stand by you, whatever anyone says of you—where you lead me I will follow—and I will not let anything come between us."

He gave a little cry of tender triumph that was almost like a caught sob. A woman!—she had

bloomed into a woman at his touch, and the promise of a woman's endurance was on her lips and eyes. They drew together under the green leaves without either of them seeming to invite the other, and clasped in each other's arms kissed and kissed again with little thrills of delight and glad surprise. While through the rapture of the morning the audible voice of Spring rang across the valley : " Cuckoo ! cuckoo ! cuckoo ! " and fainter off beyond the river : " Cuckoo ! cuckoo ! "

They came back lingeringly through the happy wood, Wise with his arm round the girl's shoulders and her hands in his. She looked up at him speechlessly, and a half-forgotten line from the most beautiful of love-poems rose to his lips :

" ' Thou art fair, O my love ! thou hast dove's eyes ! ' "

For the brooding tenderness in them was no longer veiled in maiden reserve. Her face flushed a little under his intent gaze, and she tried to laugh herself back into everyday.

" We shall be late for breakfast, Gilbert—and I shall be scolded ! "

" Then we won't go home to breakfast at all," he said gaily, but the ardent gaze was still making her blush and turn her head restlessly. " We will stay here in Fairyland and eat what the fairies bring us."

" Ah, but I shall take my Fairyland with me—wherever I go ! " she said quickly, and ran the risk of another reckless embrace in full sight of the open valley as they emerged from the trees. The " dove's eyes " were almost shy again as she pushed him from her.

" You mustn't—Simmons could see ! "

" Give me your hand, then, at least, for the hill

Did you know what I meant when I asked you to take mine ? ”

“ No—I only thought—if you had meant it—that I would give you mine—willingly.”

“ Cuckoo ! cuckoo ! ” sang the Spring. And some exquisite, unseen minstrel added : “ Kiss sweet ! kiss sweet !—pretty—pretty—pretty——”

It was a magic morning, all the lovelier for the petulant clouds and snatches of rain that broke the glowing day. As Primrose and Wise came climbing up the hill demurely hand in hand—the gentleman assisting the lady up the ascent !—the sun had disappeared and a great black cloud was stretching a lovely shadow over Westmoor, intensifying its purples and blue-greys. Simmons was tightening Black Beauty’s girths as if he had never thought of a briar out of his own cottage, and expressed a fear that they might have a shower. But Wise and Primrose laughed as they rode homeward, the soft rain pelting in their faces and the sun peeping out through the cloud to see if they were wet. It was all over in ten minutes, but the diamond drops hung on the gorse bushes and gemmed the horses’ manes. There was an old man with a basket trudging over the Down whose soft hat held the drops still in its brim, and they watched him take it off and shake it dry philosophically.

“ Looking for blackberries, father ? ” said Wise, as they rode past, with a glance at the budding brambles.

“ No, my son, for water-cresses ! ” said old Charley, looking up with a twinkle.

Wise threw his head up and laughed to hear the joke turned against him. “ That is the old man who brought the primroses for your birthday,” he said

softly. "He is a friend of mine. Give him a pretty greeting, Primrose Day!"

"Oh!" said Primrose, starting, and, turning in her saddle, she touched Charley's bent shoulder naturally and gratefully with her finger-tips. "I want to thank you for the primroses you brought us in April," she said. "I live at Meary House."

"It was a pleasure, Madam," said old Charley in his gentleman's voice; and then he added, as if he understood: "God bless you both this beautiful morning!" and fell behind to tell Simmons that he had seen a stoat in the lower woods and feared for the General's young pheasants. Charley was allowed to go anywhere by the keepers of the whole countryside, for he never failed to report on what he saw, and was of real service to them. He only traded in God's fruit and flowers, and he was harmless and invariably civil.

Wise and Primrose rode on through the pungent gorse which was glittering with the petulant shower. Something of the perversity of the weather was in his eyes as he glanced at her in his sidelong fashion again.

"You know, Primrose, I never intended to fall in love with you! I thought you a little minx who wanted a good shaking when you lectured me on girls smoking."

"And I thought you impertinent!" she retorted with a new spirit.

"So I am!"

It was so true that they both laughed. "We shall act as correctives to each other," he said more seriously. "Each of us has what the other lacks, and perhaps rather too much of it. I think we were born for each other, Primrose Day."

It did not occur to them that the General and Lady Gracia were likely to be of a very different opinion. In their estimation their daughter was born for something widely apart from the sphere of an officer's wife in the New Army—a very young officer, in rank at least, who was nobody socially and whose prospects were certainly dubious. And Gilbert Wise—again in their estimation—was born to do his duty in that state of life to which it had pleased God to call him, the Almighty having plainly made it a different state to Primrose's ; and, if he became tiresome, to get killed as soon as possible. But the lovers were sublimely indifferent to these probable opinions, and parted at the gate on the Down with the future all settled to their own content. Wise was to call upon the General as soon as possible, and to lay the case before him, while Primrose was to prepare her mother. The morning was too perfect for discouragement, and as she rode the bridle-track home to Meary House, the girl heard him singing outside the wall, as she had heard him when she awaited a Fairy Prince, not recognizing that he was one, to her :

“ The robin's on the wing again ; I hear the call o' Spring again ;
 And fain am I to follow, lass ; it calls me not in vain !
 Yea, I would join the chorus ; lo, the highway is before us—
 But what if she, my first beloved, should call to me again ? ”

“ The wanderlure is part o' me, and love is in the heart o' me—— ”
 The voice died fitfully into distance, in characteristic fashion, so that she fancied she heard scraps of the song after the context was lost :

“ Yea, I will follow you, my lass, around the world and through,
 my lass. ”

But what if she, my first beloved, should call again to me ? ”

“ I wish he had not sung that song—to-day,” said Primrose with a little sigh. And then the dove's eyes

filled with tears. "And it is just because he is—like that—that I love him all the more!" she confessed to her own heart. The tantalizing, half-elusive personality mocked her own simple narrow views of life, and almost hurt her; but he had opened the doors of larger possibilities, and shown her a wider scope and other standards beside that taught to her.

Gilbert Wise walked up to the doors of Meary House at twenty minutes to four the following afternoon and asked audience of the General. At four-thirty he walked out, having been formally and conclusively rejected as a suitor to Miss Templeton without the benefit of a doubt.

"Whatever your prospects may be, in Canada or elsewhere," said the General decidedly, "I could not entertain the idea of your marrying my daughter, and I know that my wife would agree with me. I do not quite understand, Mr. Wise, how you have obtained sufficient opportunity to meet her often enough to make you suggest such a thing. Have you—spoken to her herself?" he added more sharply.

"Yes," said Wise, and his manner was a little more cavalier from the way in which he had been met. "I asked Miss Templeton to marry me yesterday and obtained her consent. Then I came to you."

"It would have been behaving more honourably if you had come to me first," said the General, flustered at the amazing idea of Primrose being a confederate. "Then I should have told you at once that it was not to be thought of, and the matter need have gone no further."

"But until I had Miss Templeton's consent it was hardly worth while asking yours, was it?" said Wise coolly. "And, having hers, I asked yours as a matter

of form—but it does not alter my intention to marry her.”

“My daughter,” said the General with cold conviction, “would never take such a step without her parents’ consent.”

“Then had you not better consent as soon as possible?” suggested Wise demurely. Under the long curled lashes his eyes looked soft and sleepy, but the right corner of his provoking mouth was lifted in the suggestion of a smile. The General froze.

“I am not joking, sir. I have given you my ultimatum. I will wish you good day, and regret that we cannot welcome you here any longer under the circumstances.”

So Wise was bowed out, and walked down the long drive to the Lodge, where he had left his horse, with apparent unconcern. He did not look at all like a rejected suitor, but when he came to the bend in the drive that hid him from the house, he evinced a sudden and earnest interest in the thick shrubberies of rhododendron and the old mossy wall that bounded them. Indeed, he pushed his furtive way through the bushes and measured the wall with his eye before returning decorously to the drive. There was no one in the shrubbery, as might have been imagined, and Mr. Wise’s interest was strictly limited to the old grey stone and ivy and moss that formed the boundary to the grounds of Meary House. It would not be an easy wall to climb, but it was not impossible for youthful activity. He liked adventure.

In the meantime Primrose had been no more successful with Lady Gracia. At first the mother had been a little inclined to severity, her keener senses warning her that such a state of things could only have

come about through an intimacy aided and abetted by the girl as well as the presumptuous young man. But Primrose neither shrank nor drooped for accusation, and the small white oval of her face presented such a steady front to parental authority that Lady Gracia changed her tactics. She laughed and shrugged her shoulders as at a preposterous suggestion.

"What an idea! He has certainly a good opinion of his own value. I suppose he thinks he has only to ask and to have. I wonder what sort of people he *can* have mixed with?"

"But, Mamma—I love him!"

"Oh, my dear child, every girl loves the first man who asks her to marry him—or thinks she does. I am only sorry that this tiresome Mr. Wise should have managed to be the first. I feel as if your father and I were careless guardians, Primrose. But the War has much to answer for."

She was disguising her annoyance under an affectionate contrition. And she really did regret that the first man to speak of such things to her ewe lamb should not have been someone more possible to consider—even though not actually acceptable. Eric Hoddington, or Arthur Penndragon, though she would have emphatically pronounced against the latter, would have been better agents in her estimation for a first whisper of love than Gilbert Wise. Someone one knows, thought poor Lady Gracia, who really believed that Primrose would have been better served by Eric as a lover with all one's doubts of his moral character, since he was at least a Hoddington. She kissed Primrose and smiled at her as at a spoilt child denied a toy.

"Don't take it too tragically, my darling! I have

no doubt he has said all the same pretty things to a dozen other girls—Miss Tina Medlicott perhaps!” and Lady Gracia made a little face.

“I am not taking it tragically at all, Mamma. But I must make you understand that I love Gilbert Wise, and that I have promised to marry him.”

“I do not think you will find that Mr. Wise wishes it without our consent, Primrose,” said her mother dryly. “It would make a considerable difference to your future.”

Then for the first time the girl flushed, a slow, painful shame from forehead to chin. But it was not for herself or her lover so much as for the soiling of her new love-dream by her mother, the shrewd, sordid point of view that was thrust upon her. For one startled moment her eyes looked a woman’s reproach at Lady Gracia, and then it seemed as if a veil fell over her face, and she turned away without further comment; nor did she refer to the subject again for some time. It was as if they had desecrated something sacred with their acquired estimate of human nature, their barter and exchange, their matrimonial market where girls were deftly bargained for by the high-class buyer, and manœuvred into acceptance between nodding rows of merchant relatives. If they questioned her she answered them, adhering to her decision; so they did not question her, preferring to sweep the distasteful matter out of their joint lives, and to let Gilbert Wise and his presumption sink into the realms of things forgotten. He came no more to Meary House, and Primrose rode no more on the Down, and that was the end of it as far as the General and Lady Gracia knew.

Only, had they listened, they might have heard

the cuckoo calling in their woods far across the valley of the Ope—cuckoo ! cuckoo ! cuckoo !—until he was faintly answered from the other side the river, cuckoo ! cuckoo !—and learnt the daring and the lawlessness of Spring.

CHAPTER IX

"A wish that she hardly dared to own
For something better than she had known."

JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER.

IN spite of the War, Miss Johns meditated an extravagance.

For some years she had secretly yearned over the prospectuses of London sales to be read in the illustrated ladies' papers, or which were sent to her more affluent friends, and she longed for the astonishing bargains to be noted in those catalogues. A bargain was dear to her heart, like many women, but the real attraction was the idea of possessing something that she could not afford in the ordinary way. Surely those silks and chiffons and wonderful embroideries, "to be cleared absolutely regardless of cost," were the materials usually chosen by duchesses and worn in their extravagant boudoirs over a dainty breakfast languidly partaken of after last night's dissipation! It was always the model "peignoirs" (no mere dressing-gown), or the "French dinner-coatees" that attracted Miss Johns in her delaine blouse and serge skirt. They sounded so luxurious! And because she wished to feel like a duchess—just once in her life!—she anxiously calculated and economized to afford herself a week in London at a time when most

people leave it, in order to attend a great sale and pick up one of those silk and chiffon things, though it were even "slightly soiled."

It was Wellborn's catalogue that fascinated her most, and to Wellborn's that she meant to go. This firm had once sent a catalogue to a friend of Miss Johns' in which she had seen a French dressing-jacket ostensibly marked down to six shillings from three guineas, because it was faded! Ever since then Miss Johns had been like a very mild tigress who has tasted rose-water instead of blood. She dreamed of dressing-jackets marked down from pounds to shillings, and hugged herself to think how different they would look when cleaned, and with new ribbons! That princely house of Wellborn's in Westbourne Grove could perhaps afford to throw faded goods away at such a price, but it was the Miss Johns' of the world who would profit in feeling like a duchess.

After months of margarine instead of butter (and contempt from Minnie beyond words), of using the ashes to eke out a low fire, and denying herself in everything except charity, Miss Johns found that she could just afford a week in London at the beginning of July, if she left her summer holiday to chance. After all, she did not really go to London, though she thought she did. She went to a boarding-house in Brixham Heath, which is a suburb on the south side of the river, a boarding-house which was very select, though still preserving that hopeless division between class and class that manifested itself even in the bar of the "Penndragon." There was a long table in the dining-room where the less important guests were allotted seats, and there were one or two small tables in the windows where the more important were so

“select” that they kept to themselves. Of these there were some people called Chumleigh-Browne, who represented the upper end of the social ladder, while the stout lady who dropped her h’s at the middle table represented the lower. Miss Johns paid two guineas a week for a small room on the second floor and came between the two grades, but sat, of course, at the middle table. She did not like the stout lady, or the facetious elderly man who made loud jokes, or the people who said to the boarding-house proprietress: “I’ll trouble you for another portion of that shape, if you please, Mrs. Smith!” But she was too gently courteous to turn her back upon them or pass obvious comments as the Chumleigh-Brownes did. And yet, though she felt that the Chumleigh-Brownes were ill-mannered and consequently ill-bred, she could not help wishing that they would admit her to their very select circle, simply because they represented to her the best within her reach at the moment. The family party consisted of a mother and two daughters, all rather too smart and too assured, and they had their own jokes and their own interests as well as their own table, and rarely spoke to anyone else even in the drawing-room, where all the ladies sat after dinner and made spasmodic conversation with their neighbours, while they knitted for the wounded. The stout woman offered to turn the heel of a sock for the spinster in black silk with the old-fashioned hair ornaments, and the spinster for ever afterwards went and sat beside Miss Johns to avoid her, and Miss Johns looked wistfully at the Chumleigh-Brownes playing auction bridge in a corner, and referring to superior friends outside the boarding-house one rung on the ladder above themselves. Everybody was looking upward

to something that seemed a little better than their own daily life, an existence with more of colour and romance in it, though it sounded mere material wealth when put into words. It was all a little pitiful.

The Chumleigh-Brownes despised sales. People generally do who buy most of their clothes there. Miss Johns heard them decrying the great sales—Harrod's, and Woolland's, even Bond Street—and felt a little hot for her secret purpose. But she could not abandon it. There was a dinner-coat of purple velvet in Wellborn's list going for eighteen shillings, on which she had set her heart; or if she should be so unfortunate as to miss a train and lose it, her next selection was a dressing-jacket of spotted muslin and lace for twenty-five shillings that she *must* have. But she wanted the dinner-coat most, and thrilled to the moment when she should slip it on over her crêpe-de-chine blouse and sit down to fresh herrings and bread and jam with the table centre to perfect the illusion. I think she pictured the Duchess of Portland or the Countess of Crewe in similar circumstances, having seen notices of both these ladies' war-work of late, and I am sure that the impression made her very happy. It was worth all the margarine and Minnie's scorn to contemplate it.

On the first of July she had to rise at an abnormally early hour to catch a train to Victoria, and then an omnibus to Westbourne Grove, and to ask Mrs. Smith to let her have breakfast early as a favour. She had an appointment in London, she said guiltily, shrinking beneath the cold and cruel eye of the Chumleigh-Brownes which seemed to divine her real purpose. All the way to the station she was divided between a lurking sense of the absurdity of her excursion and

a fear that she should be late for the sale, and the journey across London seemed interminable. Every woman was her enemy, and appeared to have a sale catalogue in her hands, ready to pounce upon the velvet dinner-coat and to bear it off in triumph before her tearful eyes.

"One would have thought that in the second year of the War they would not think of going to sales!" said Miss Johns resentfully, and then recollected that she was going herself. "But I have wanted it for so long!" thought the poor thing, hurrying into the wrong omnibus, and causing sarcastic comments from the conductor when she insisted on getting out again. It was a mercy that she ever found the way, for really she was so flurried that she nearly went to Putney or Cricklewood.

As Miss Johns alighted at the corner opposite to Wellborn's, a clock in a shop near by showed her that it was only a quarter past nine, and save for one or two people sauntering by the windows and looking in indifferently, there was no concourse as yet outside the great store. She was practically the first on the opening sale day, in itself an achievement.

Miss Johns crossed the road and looked with feverish eyes into the windows. Even the splendours of the catalogue and her own imagination could not alter the fact that the gowns looked a trifle tired before the battle that would surge about them had begun, and that the blouses were not cheap—not cheap to an income that marked seven and sixpence as an "afternoon" one, and ten shillings as the high-water mark of price. There were some at thirty-five shillings and some at twenty-five. Her near-sighted eyes, peering through the glass, noted that they were

beautifully made. One cannot expect such elegance and finish for ten shillings, and she sighed that such things were not for her.

But other women were beginning to arrive now, and she hurried to the doorway to take up her position. There was a tall, thin woman in a leather hat and a costume of raucous sage green, with a weather-beaten face and grey hair. She looked like business, and the catalogue in her hand was marked with pencilled notes. Suppose that she should have come to buy a dinner-coat fit for a duchess! Miss Johns looked at her stark figure and the honesty of her whitened locks, and felt the anger of an outraged artist. That elderly head appearing above the rich purple and soft folds was a mockery. She felt that even she herself was better suited to the lovely thing of which she was half afraid.

To Leather Hat arrived a lady in a blue serge costume with many buttons, a plump face and a tumbled collar. Followed exclamations and much converse, while Miss Johns stood by with open ears, and the stray loiterers behind her began to fill the entrance.

"I hope you haven't come to buy what I have," said Leather Hat to Serge and Buttons jocularly. "See here! This little evening gown—so cheap! And I thought it would be so useful!"

"Naw!" drawled the Serge, and her voice betrayed the undeniable accent of an American. "I've hardly seen the models this year, and don't know what I want. Look at this! I bought this *cos-tume* in the Autumn—twenty-five guineas—here it is at eight. My dear, it was the most *ex-quisite* gown in town! I wore it to a dinner and a supper afterwards."

Miss Johns glanced half appraisingly at the pink cheeks and ill-moulded features with a dubious feeling that she was not amongst the aristocracy as yet. Perhaps they did not even send their maids to wait on the doorstep, but rolled them up in the motors even now beginning to stop at the edge of the pavement. The crowd was thickening. People were chatting all round her, marking catalogues, making appointments to "do" each a different department and meet at a third. Miss Johns was not absorbed in those whose object she learned, as soon as she knew that they were not rivals; but despite the evening dresses, she suspected the lady in the leather hat of fell designs upon her dinner-coat.

A third friend had joined Leather Hat and the American, and was immediately asked what she had come to buy.

"My dear, I didn't know *you* shopped here! *Don't* tell me you want my little evening gown!"

"No, indeed. I am not buying from the catalogue. Only the ready-to-wear afternoon gowns. I always go to Wellborn's or Debenham's. I think they are quite the best style."

Miss Johns had thought so, too, but in the mouths of the great Middle Class she began to suspect her own opinions.

"Well, here's a lady from across the Herring Pond," said Leather Hat facetiously, "who's come up from the country specially to buy!"

"Are you buying nothing but evening gowns yourself?"

"I want this coat and skirt, but I shall go to the evening gowns first because they are cheaper, and the rush is always for the bargains. Then, when I've got

that, I shall make a run for the coats and skirts. But I shan't get this—it will be gone ! ”

Her voice fell half a note as she put her finger on an item in the catalogue. Miss Johns suddenly remembered seeing a news-bill at Victoria of heavy casualties at the front, though she had not had time to look at the morning paper, and experienced a sense of shame. Would Leather Hat's voice have dropped that half-note for the casualty lists ? Would her own heart have beat so fast for British losses as for the loss of the dinner-coat ?

But the third lady in the group in front of her was too absorbed in the sale for conscience pricks. “ Do tell us what your method is when the doors are open ! ” she said breathlessly to Leather Hat. “ I know you know Wellborn's so well.”

“ Yes, I'm just waiting to hear,” chimed in the American.

“ Oh, my dear, a woman who has come across the Herring Pond doesn't need any telling ! You are cleverer than we are.”

“ But I don't know this place at sale time,” drawled the marked voice with the accent. “ I've always bought my suits when they were the last thing out ! ”

“ Well, I'll tell you. As soon as they open the doors I shall go right away up the stairs to the evening gowns, and I shall pick out a girl who looks like one of the staff and knows the stock—not one of those in to help during the sale, you can always tell them—and I shall say to her, ‘ Get me this, and be quick. Run along before someone else has it,’ and then when I get it we can go slower.”

The other two women were listening with absorbed interest, even Miss Johns had pressed closer with

sharpened ears to hear. "That's a good method. I'll do that," she thought. "If she goes straight to the evening gowns, I must be first with the dinner-coats." Somehow in all the crowd, now extended over the edge of the pavement, she feared no one so much as that capable Leather Hat.

A man in uniform, evidently a door-keeper, forced his way through the crowd and took up his position in front of Leather Hat and the American, his arms outstretched across the doors. He was at once bombarded with questions and wheedled for information. "You'll let me pass first, won't you? because I was up against the door when you pushed me away," said Leather Hat. "Which way does one go for the furs, porter?" "Where are the dark-blue costumes?" "What's that you say? To the right, and then to the right again?" "It's ten now, just on the hour." "Mind the step, you will slip." "Now we're moving. He's opening the doors!"

"Stand back, all of you!" said the porter with the familiarity of one grown contemptuous in sales. The great doors swung to and fro, and the crowd surged, thinking that they revolved. The porter flung back the women behind him, in the effort to fling back the doors. Miss Johns felt the edge of the step beneath her feet and seized the arm of a lady in front; the doors opened, and the sale was begun.

The crowd of women made a forward rush, fighting for places. Away went Leather Hat with the others at her heels. Crossing the entrance at a run, she took the stairs two steps at a time, her sinuous body in its forward movement scudding for the evening gowns like some human stoat. Miss Johns followed close behind, panting, and triumphantly aware that

she had been fifth through the doorway. For all one can tell, her sensations may have equalled those of Lord Dundonald on his entrance into Ladysmith. She ran up the stairs, though far behind the flying legs of Leather Hat, and found herself whirled round in the *mêlée* of charging women and running assistants. She fought her way through gallantly, for she was a small woman and not used to rough manners. She had accomplished her aim, she was first amongst the tea-gowns and dinner-coats, the earnestness of her desire seeming to have guided her there by instinct. One of the hovering assistants reached her at the same moment with "What can I get you, Madam?" and she pointed to the sketch of the dinner-coat with a shaking hand.

"That!" she said, and being an unconscious imitator, she added in Leather Hat's own style: "Run along quick and get it before anyone else can!"

The assistant ran, but a minute later returned with a superintendent and a sympathetic regret.

"Sorry, Madam, this went this morning by telegram!"

Miss Johns' eyes filled with tears, and her throat contracted with a foolish sob. It seemed so hard when she had worked like this for her poor little aim. The vision of her lamp-lit room and the table centre, and Minnie's increased respect for the purple dinner-coat, all faded into distance together. She had feared Leather Hat and the crowd of women on the spot, but she had never thought of anything so cruel as being forestalled by a telegram. At that rate, she might have spared herself the journey to town and the fatigue of this morning's rush, and simply written or wired from South Wessex. It is true she must have

bought the coat without first seeing it, but then she had never had the least intention of not buying it once it was displayed before her. She felt so bewildered by the blow that for the minute she could not collect herself to ask for her next selection, the dressing-jacket, and the assistant watched her, half amused and half sympathetic.

"I'm very sorry it's gone, Madam. Can I show you anything else?"

Miss Johns' hands trembled as she turned the catalogue and pointed out her second fancy. "Is this sold, too?"

"No, I don't think so—it was not, when we opened, anyway. I'll go and see."

There was a palpitating delay while the girl pushed her way through the crowd of women, exclaiming, buying, almost snatching the goods from each other, and Miss Johns followed her, trying to regain the elation of the first moments when she found herself in the great shop and thought her bargain accomplished. The dressing-jacket was neither so useful nor so suitable as the dinner-coat would have been, and it was higher in price, but she felt bound to buy something now that she had come. It would be too humiliating to go home and never to feel like a duchess at all, after all her economy and trouble! The dressing-jacket was not sold, though a hungry lady was fingering it amongst others even as the assistant picked it out and displayed it to Miss Johns in all its tumbled finery. It was a good deal tumbled and soiled, and it was more suitable to the Tropics than a doubtful English Summer; but that did not affect Miss Johns. Her spirits began to rise as she looked at the muslin and lace, the silk lining, the broad soft

ribbon threaded through insertion at the waist and the little bunch of crushed forget-me-nots on the shoulder. When it was cleaned and the ribbons were pressed, it would be very pretty indeed—very pretty and suitable for a young bride or a girl of eighteen, if she had realized it, but she did not pause for that. “Yes, I think it will do—I think I will have it,” she began, fumbling for the purse in her bag, and then catching the eye of the hungry lady fixed on it also “-I *will* have it !” she said almost indignantly.

“Will you take it with you, Madam, and are you buying anything else ? Bath-caps or night-dresses ?”

Bath-caps ! still more beautiful things with floppy lace borders and coquettish love-knots tied into their frills ! Miss Johns had never owned such a thing, and knew perfectly well that she would never dare to wear it with Minnie’s disapproving eye on her. But it was irresistible to go and look, and with the dressing-jacket hanging limply over her arm, she was piloted to a basket wherein lay the most wonderful head-gears. Miss Johns gasped. Even to her infatuated eyes it was plain that the pinks and blues and snowy frills were only appropriate to a younger face ; and yet the love of acquisition was upon her and the reckless desire to buy for something better than utility just once in her life. There was one that did not seem so impossible even for her—a mixture of delicate mauve and fawn with a narrow pleat of chiffon, and tiny ribbon trimmings fretted with tinier rosebuds. It was not cheap—it was twelve shillings and sixpence, which was more than Miss Johns would have given for a blouse or a hat ; but the spirit of the snatching, fighting women round her had descended on her also, and she added the bath-cap to her former

purchase with a kind of wild exultation. Even when she had paid her bill for one pound eighteen shillings and sixpence she did not care, though it was a pound more than she had started out to spend; and she walked through the show-rooms looking at the breathless crowd which seemed ever increasing, and took a second-hand pleasure in each bargain that was made. Shopping with some women is a kind of infatuation, and affects them like drink or gambling. They cannot resist it, and, even if they do not buy themselves, they like to watch others doing so.

By twelve o'clock Miss Johns was really tired, hot, and much knocked about by people brushing past her and pushing her out of their way. But she was giddily happy, her eyes surfeited with expensive clothes and furs such as she had never owned. She carried, besides, the box in which were her own precious purchases. and the thought of the dressing-jacket and the bath-cap began to console her for the loss of the dinner-coat. The mere fact that they were hers glorified them into a fictitious value, and she longed for the moment when she could look at them again.

Before she went home, however, she felt that she must have some lunch, and not risk having to wait for a train to Brixham Heath hungry and tired. She took an omnibus to Victoria, as it was all on her way, and she was not justified in going to the expense of a cab after her reckless purchases.

"I can get a sandwich at the buffet, or indeed something hot," thought Miss Johns. "The refreshment rooms at the big stations are often quite good."

As she crossed the wilderness of platform looking

for the buffet, she was struck by the familiarity of a figure standing by one of the bookstalls, and leisurely opening the paper he had just bought. Miss Johns was short-sighted, but surely it was Eric Hoddington! Nothing was more probable than that he should be in London for a few weeks of the Summer, even though there was no Season, for he was a young man with plenty of money and a wide circle of friends; but Miss Johns was quite startled by the coincidence of seeing somebody from her own neighbourhood. She wondered what he was doing in town, and where he stayed—some great hotel in the West End, no doubt—and who he visited. Lord and Lady Wessex had a town house, but it had been closed since the War, and they had been much more at their place in the country, doing War work; besides which, even Miss Johns was faintly aware that the Hoddingtons, though "County," would not have been on visiting terms with Wessex House in London. There are realms beyond realms, and spheres beyond spheres.

Mr. Hoddington had not seen Miss Johns, and, even if he had, he would hardly have recollected that she came from Camp Rise. A middle-aged lady carrying a square box, with her hat a trifle awry from the excitement of the morning, was not likely to claim his attention; and, besides, it had been caught in his turn by two people just passing the barrier to the Brighton line—a square-shouldered man with red hair and a burnt face, and a handsome girl, somewhat overdressed and obviously of a different class to her companion. Miss Johns saw them, too, at the same moment, and had a renewed shock. For the big, coarse-looking man was Sir Arthur Penndragon, and the girl—where had she seen that peach-bloom skin

of the West and those bold dark eyes? Why, it was Lottie Preece—surely Lottie Preece from her own District! And with Sir Arthur Penndragon, in those new, flimsy clothes—no, no! it was impossible! It could not be Lottie. Sir Arthur certainly had a young woman with him of a type that—well, that gave colour to the tales told of him. It was very unfortunate that he should be going by the Brighton line, and that he should have such a girl with him. Miss Johns felt hot and uncomfortable, and wished that this second coincidence had not occurred. Anyhow, it was not her business, and young men will be young men. Had she been quite sure that it was Lottie Preece she would have been more uneasy still, with a dreadful suspicion that she ought to do something—follow the girl and speak to her—ascertain that she was coming to no harm in Penndragon's company. But it seemed to Miss Johns quite impossible that the sullen, black-browed school-girl she had known not long since in heavy boots and an old cotton frock could be the creature in a short silk skirt and chiffon blouse wide open at the neck to show some cheap jewellery. It was nothing but a chance likeness to distress her.

She had paused mechanically, near to Eric Hod-dington, who was still standing by the bookstall. He held his paper in his hands, but his eyes followed the couple who had just passed the barrier, and he gave a little light laugh—Eric's laugh, well known to his personal friends, and that filled in so many insinuations to which his actual words never bound him. Miss Johns instinctively drew back and gave a little shiver.

“It was all very unfortunate,” she thought, as she

hurried away to the refreshment room. "I really wish I had not seen Sir Arthur with that fast-looking girl. But I need never mention it. And I wish Mr. Hoddington had not laughed at such a thing! I think—I really think—that he is not quite nice"

CHAPTER X

"There, little girl! don't cry—
They've broken your heart, I know.
And the rainbow gleams of your childhood's dreams
Are things of the long ago.
But Heaven holds all for which you sigh—
There, little girl, don't cry!"

JAMES WHITCOMBE RILEY.

MISS TEMPLETON had taken her Summer holiday early that year, and went away to the sea with her mother in June. Meary House was usually empty in August, when the family took a change of air, and in the Winter months, when Primrose accompanied her parents to London for educative reasons. She was to have been presented in her twentieth year, but the War had prevented that, and, in consequence, she had gone on living the quiet, guarded life that Lady Gracia had herself lived as a young girl. It was due to the disturbing influence of Gilbert Wise and his audacious proposal that her parents decided that change was the best antidote for the young lady, and she was transplanted to a seaside resort in Wales, Lady Gracia happening to know some of the landed proprietors in the neighbourhood, which, to use her own phrase, "made it pleasant."

Whether Primrose found it pleasant it was impos-

sible to tell. She seemed to have grown a little taller since her twenty-first birthday, and to be still more sedate. She had made no fuss about Wise—she was a well-trained girl—but she had looked her mother and father once in the eyes, and said very distinctly that she loved him, and would marry no one else. Then she settled down into the old routine, and superintended the dairy, assisted at the Wessex Hut, visited hospitals, drove with her mother to call upon the County, and rode her horse with Simmons in attendance—but not on Meary Down. It was not an exciting life for a girl of twenty-one, but it was eminently lady-like.

“You are quite sure that Primrose never sees that young man now?” said the General, with a knit between his brows, in confidential chat to his wife. “Impudent young beggar! He did not seem to me at all to regard it as final.”

“I am positive,” said Lady Gracia decidedly. “And I know they do not correspond, because I told Primrose that we did not wish it. I know my daughter, Hugh!”

“You think she is not thinking about him?” said the General a little doubtfully.

“Oh, no doubt she is thinking about him—until someone else puts him out of her head!” said Lady Gracia with a laugh. “A girl always thinks of the man who makes love to her, however impossible he is. She will get over the fancy all in good time.”

“I don’t know much about girls,” said the General. “But I don’t like the way that Primrose shuts her lips when she has spoken of him. And she is looking very pale, surely!”

“Primrose is always pale—a ‘lily maid of Astolot.’

Now, Hugh, don't fuss about her. Of course, this has upset us all a little, but the less notice we take of it the better. I am sorry the neighbourhood has not more nice young people to ask here, but the modern girl or young man is so impossible. I really can't think of anyone to invite except Eric Hoddington, and he is only a *pis aller*. However, we'll have him to dinner."

Eric came to dinner, and played bridge with the family afterwards. He was a Remount Officer, as well as working on War Committees, but his duties seemed to weigh lightly upon him, for he was always obtainable. He knew all the gossip of the neighbourhood, too, and all the wildest rumours of the War, and though, of course, Lady Gracia did not believe them, she was one of those people who would listen to any extravagance and ask for more. The passing of the Russians through England had been a favourite nine-days' wonder to her, the survival of Lord Kitchener was another, and the landing of the Germans—especially in Wessex—never failed to find her a speculator. She could not resist asking Eric about Wise, even though she had specially stated that she wished to hear no more of him, and she got her visitor for a few minutes alone before he left to plumb him on the subject. Eric knew as much as there was to know and a great deal more. Wise was still doing light duty at Camp Rise, but had been before the Medical Board lately, and had gone up to London on two or three days' leave, ostensibly to see a specialist about his arm, which was not yet sound.

"And someone else has gone up to London, I hear," said Eric with a shrug of his shoulders. "There has been the deuce of a fuss about some girl who was a

milkmaid at one of the farms. She has been going off to Westover too much of late, and reported as being seen with a fellow in khaki, and now she's run off for good—or bad ! ”

“ My dear Eric, surely you don't connect the two things together ! You don't think——”

“ *I* don't think anything—I never do,” said Eric with his light laugh. “ But it is a fact that Wise has been away on leave—in London. And it is a fact that the handsome milkmaid has run away at the same time—to London.”

“ What a dreadful thing ! ” said Lady Gracia, really shocked. “ Who are her people ? Respectable ? ”

“ Quite, I believe—labourers, you know, working people. But of course I've only heard the outlines of the story.”

“ But surely if there were a scandal he would have to leave the regiment ? I know the Colonel—he is most particular about his young officers.”

“ But there is no scandal—there is nothing to prove that Wise is the Gay Lothario ! Don't make *me* a defendant in a libel case, Lady Gracia ! *I* say nothing ! I was only telling you the curious coincidence of two people going to London at the same time.” Eric laughed his gay laugh, pressed his hostess's hand, and walked off to drive his new and fastest motor home through the Summer night at unchecked speed. He had, as he observed, “ said nothing ” about Wise and the absconding milkmaid that was definite. But he had said enough to make Lady Gracia so full of it that she could not keep it wisely to herself. The milkmaid was, of course, Lottie Preece, and she had left home with a defiant note to her father in very creditable handwriting gained

at the Board School, though the phrasing savoured of the "Soiled Heroines' Library," or the "Girls' Gay Stories." There was a clatter of tongues throughout Camp Rise and Ducketts, and Lady Gracia soon learned that the heroine of the scandal was a daughter of old Joe Preece, the dust carrier, who lived in one of the cottages on their own land. Her informant, I regret to say, was old Sarah Timms, who "mopped and mowed" before the Squire's lady the while she poured forth all the venom of her tongue on Lottie's story. The neighbourhood of Sarah had added to the bitterness of Farthing-faced Joe's position, and goaded him into a resentment against his daughter, not so much for her fall from respectability as for the consequences that reacted on himself. The old man seemed more bewildered than shocked, but he felt his humiliation keenly in the bar of the "Penn-dragon" and rarely showed his narrow face there. Lady Gracia went to see him, and was both delicate and kind in her sympathy, though she came infected with the poisonous atmosphere of Sarah's presence.

"And you have no idea as to who it is that led your daughter astray, Preece?" she said, speaking as if headstrong Lottie were an outraged lamb in the wolf's den.

"No, ma'am. Folks tu Ducketts say as she was walking with a soldier. That's all I know."

"Well, we must hope that the man meant honestly, after all, and will marry her."

In her own mind she could not but think that it was a fitting destiny for Gilbert Wise, the Canadian ranker who should never have been given a commission and allowed to visit at great houses. Let him go back to the ranks again and marry his Lottie! What

a horrible thing to have come near Primrose, to taint the air she breathed with a reflection of a vulgar passion.

"A thoroughly bad, common young man," thought Lady Gracia, her opinions running smoothly in the groove worn for them by Eric. "My poor girl!"

The affair in detail could not, of course, be discussed with the young lady; but it was unavoidable that she should not have a notion of such backslidings in general amongst the cottagers she visited. Lady Gracia thought that a vague outline might prove a tonic for her nerves, still quivering from Wise's unhallowed love-making on Meary Down.

"I have heard some very sad news in the village, Primrose," she said with due solemnity after her visit to Preece. "A young girl—one of our own cottagers—has been decoyed away to London. And I am afraid, my dear, that suspicion rests upon someone we once knew. You have had a lucky escape!"

Primrose's fair head, that had been bending over her knitting, went up with a motion suspiciously like the General's over a poaching case.

"Are you speaking of Mr. Wise, Mamma?"

Her eyes were almost stern, and singularly unflinching. She faced the accusation with a directness that put Lady Gracia a little out of her reckoning.

"I am not accusing him, Primrose. I am merely mentioning a very dreadful suspicion to rest on any young man."

"If it is only a suspicion he ought to be given a chance to clear himself, or it should not be mentioned against him," said Primrose with sudden assertion.

"I do not believe it for one instant. And I will not listen to such stories about the man I love."

"Primrose!"

"I have told you that I love him already, Mamma. You seem to have forgotten. Please don't tell me anything more that you hear about him, unless you are ready to ask him if it is true before me. You ought to be ashamed!" said Primrose, so suddenly and so violently that Lady Gracia flushed with an anger she had not experienced for years in her calm, well-controlled life. That her daughter should turn upon her like this! She drew herself up in her turn with furious dignity, the more angry because she felt that she had been in the wrong. But Primrose was not there to be scolded. She had run out of the room.

It chanced to be a Thursday, when the young lady spent the afternoon hours serving at the Wessex Hut. It was perhaps as well that her duty took her out of Meary House and divided mother and daughter for a few hours. The late encounter gave food for thought on both sides. On her way to Camp the carriage bearing Miss Templeton to her duty passed an old man with a basket tramping in the direction of Meary Down, with his soft felt hat pulled over his eyes and a long ragged coat that made him grotesquely like the Pied Piper. The basket was empty, for Charley had been into Westover to sell his wares; but Miss Templeton imperiously pulled the check-string, and Simmons stopped the bay horses.

"I wish to speak to that old hawker, Simmons," said Miss Templeton, letting down the window, and before Simmons could turn the ponderous carriage round she had jumped out and run after the old man, who was walking quickly along the road, despite his age. Charley went lightly on his feet instead of

plodding like other hawkers. He did not seem to be hurrying, but he had covered some hundred yards before Primrose's breathless voice behind him made him pause.

"Charley! have you anything for me?"

The old eyes under the shabby hat had a kindly twinkle as they met the girl's eager gaze; but he shook his head. "Not to-day, Madam. Else I should have come up to the house. You can see I have no flowers!"

"If you see—him—" said Primrose below her hurrying breath, "will you tell him I have heard false stories—ugly stories!—but that I do not believe a word of them? Oh, Charley, find some self-heal for me—blue convolvulus—anything that is 'true blue,' and give it to him! He will understand."

"I will, Madam."

She tried to smile through the real mist in her eyes and ran back to the waiting carriage. "I wanted some wild flowers—but the old man had sold all his in Westover," she said in explanation to Simmons.

Simmons knew Charley, and did not see anything suspicious in the encounter. He often came to Meary House through the Summer, and no one thought that he brought Primrose love-letters—not obvious, compromising epistles, but delicate love-messages in flower form from under his legitimate wares. Sometimes—but rarely—there had been a scrap of paper or ribbon hidden amongst the flowers, unknown even to Charley, and on it a written line, but only such as might keep alive a girl's romance, and no loves and doves or hackneyed vows. There were other means of communication, too, that implicated nobody. The Camp Rise Express had brought a load of logs to the

door once (the General prided himself on employing all sorts of quaint local conveyances), and between his uncouth roar at the donkeys Jonathan had somehow conveyed a volume of verse to Miss Templeton's hands—one she had inadvertently left in a cottage she had visited. It was quite true that she had visited the cottage and left the book behind her; but it came back with certain annotations that had not been there before. Even Farthing-faced Joe on the roadway had had a message to deliver—before the inclusion of himself as a supernumerary in the scandal of Lottie—and had respectfully begged to inform Miss Templeton that the soldiers had been leaving broken bottles on the Down, and it was unsafe to ride there; but that certain lanes were quite safe. And Lillicrap the blacksmith, driving a nail in Black Beauty's shoe, had seen Mr. Wise the night before, and heard from him that the specialist in London would have to see him again in another fortnight about his arm. Lillicrap, in his sturdy independence, feared no one, and having a soft corner in his heart for young folks, "thought Miss Templeton might like to know." Lady Gracia, in her lofty withdrawal from any communication with the enemy, had miscalculated his capacity for making friends. It seemed as if the very flowers and fruits of the earth, and the beasts of the field, had become his agents.

Miss Templeton did not pick up Mrs. Thornhill at the Vicarage to-day, for Mrs. Thornhill had had to go into Westover earlier in the morning, and would stop at Camp on her way home. They met at the Hut, and exchanged amicable greetings; but the young lady was a little *distracte*, and Mrs. Thornhill was full of gossip. Between the spasms of serving

Banbury cakes and tea, and passing packets of "Black Cat" across the counter, she could not resist pouring the latest scandal of the parish into the ears of Miss Noble at the Post-Office, or Miss Johns at the counter, forgetting in her eagerness that Miss Templeton could also hear.

"I have heard to-day *for certain* who it was that took Lottie Preece away—though of course he'll deny it!" she said impressively. "Perfectly scandalous! He ought to be forced to marry her. In this neighbourhood, too!—Primrose dear, do get yourself a cup of tea! You look tired out with standing, and your face is quite white."

But Primrose, with that white face, waited for the certainty of which Mrs. Thornhill spoke, and did not move away to get a cup of tea or anything else.

"Does it matter who took her away, since the thing is done?" said Miss Noble, looking up with her weary old eyes. "And if the man denies it, who can be certain?"

"Because he was seen—seen with her in London!" said the Vicar's wife, shocked that her veracity should be impugned. "It is that Mr. Wise, who used to sing at the concerts here. I'm afraid he went to Meary House, too, didn't he, Primrose dear? Of course, we all thought him rather *odd*—but not *bad*! Oh, here's a fresh lot of men! How tiresome! What can I get for you, Sergeant?"

Now Mrs. Thornhill knew a little and guessed more of the strained relations between Gilbert Wise and Meary House, and it was her business to bring his backsliding to Primrose's ears and to please Lady Gracia. She had not been confided in, though she surmised that the young man had somehow made

himself attractive even to good little Primrose, and she shot her bolt and withdrew.

"Who saw him?" asked Miss Noble a minute later when Mrs. Thornhill had served the Sergeant and had another breathing space. There was a persistence in these inquiries that put Mrs. Thornhill on her mettle, and she rapped out her reply:

"Mr. Eric Hoddington saw him in London with the girl—he said so himself!"

Miss Noble must be silenced at last with *that* statement. But now, suddenly, came a fresh query from the most unexpected quarter. Miss Johns, hitherto a silent, troubled listener, spoke with a flushed and startled face.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Thornhill, did you say that Mr. Eric Hoddington stated that he saw Mr. Wise with that poor girl in London?"

"I certainly understood so, Miss Johns. I am afraid Mr. Wise is a friend of yours, is he not?"

"I know Mr. Wise as any woman of my age may know a young man with few acquaintances in England," said Miss Johns with sudden and simple dignity. "He is a Canadian, you know, and I was pleased to welcome him to my house. He has a very kindly and friendly disposition, though somewhat unconventional. And I *know* that he did not take Lottie Preece to London!"

"But Mr. Eric Hoddington saw him!"

"Mr. Hoddington did not see him," said Miss Johns firmly, her colour rising more and more with the effort of such flat contradiction. "I happen to know because I was in London myself at the time when the poor girl went away, though I did not hear of it until afterwards. I saw her——"

“ Packet of Anstey’s, please ! ”

“ Got any shaving soap ? ”

It was very unfortunate that at the most dramatic moments of the conversation the context should be broken by such legitimate demands. Mrs. Thornhill almost threw the “ fags ” at the poor private who wanted to smoke, dispelled the hopes of shaving to the other man, and fled back to Miss Johns.

“ You saw her !—But you have said nothing about it ! ” she gasped. That such a personal addition to the scandal should have been withheld seemed to her still more scandalous. It was robbing the neighbourhood.

“ I saw no reason to mention it—for many considerations,” said Miss Johns, with a new constraint in her tone. “ As Miss Noble says, the girl having gone, it mattered very little who she went away with unless it were possible to make her return to her father, repentant. I fear ”—Miss Johns’ voice faltered and fell lower—“ that that is quite impossible. But I saw the man she was with, and it was not Mr. Wise.”

“ Then Mr. Hoddington was mistaken ! ”

“ Mr. Hoddington was not mistaken—he knew that it was not Mr. Wise. As it happened, by a double coincidence, he was standing quite near me when the girl and her—her—the man passed me. I recognized Mr. Hoddington just before I noticed Lottie ; but at the time I really doubted that it was she, not having heard of her flight.”

“ You don’t mean that it was Mr. Hoddington himself who took her away ! ” queried Mrs. Thornhill sharply, scenting a richer infamy.

“ Oh, no ! no ! But Mr. Hoddington saw Lottie

and her companion, and realized the situation, for he —laughed," said Miss Johns, with a return of her distaste. "I don't think that he is a nice man!" she added with the distressed feeling that she was revealing the feet of clay of one of her former gods.

"Cup o' cawfy and two squares, please!"

"Black Cat!—fourpenny one!"

"Cherry Dubbin!"

"Dor-nut, and one o' them triangles!"

"Two squares, and writing paper!"

"Writing paper is at the Post-Office. They call the Banbury cakes 'squares,' Primrose."

They were coming in thick and fast, and Mrs. Thornhill, with hardly time to gasp over Miss Johns' revelation, was serving everybody with the wrong goods. The "dor-nuts" (dough-nuts) and squares were the most popular, being more filling at the price, and I am afraid that Mrs. Thornhill wished that the substantial pennyworth would choke the purchasers. But Primrose slipped behind her broad back and laid a slim hand on the arm of Wise's champion, regardless of packets of Woodbines or "triangle" puffs.

"Will you let me thank you," said a soft little voice in Miss Johns' ear, "for him—and for me? I knew you were his friend. He told me so. Will you be mine also?"

CHAPTER XI

"The rich man's son inherits cares ;
The bank may break, the factory burn,
A breath may burst his bubble shares,
And soft white hands could hardly earn
A living that would serve his turn.
A heritage, it seems to me.
One scarce would wish to hold in fee."

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL.

I N the town of Westover and the surrounding villages a bolt had fallen from the blue. On the last Monday in July Hoddington's Bank suspended payment and closed its doors. There had been absolutely nothing to suggest a failure of Hoddington's, and at first the country districts at least refused to believe it. There must be some mistake—some momentary difficulty with the Government such as had checked the withdrawal of money at the beginning of the War, and was causing a beating of the heart like suffocation in Hoddington's customers ; but it would prove to be nothing but a temporary thing, perhaps even some alteration in the premises, or the death of a member of the family, that would look almost laughable afterwards when one man confessed to another : " You know, it gave me an awful turn ! Suppose Hoddington's had—but it's impossible ! "

But if the circular issued to customers seemed unbelievable, the next day's paper brought a statement of the grave financial difficulties of the partners, of the uncertainty of the dividend to become payable to creditors, and of the utter and irredeemable fact of the bank's failure. It was no doubt the War that had finally brought the tottering concern down, but it might have come at any minute—and that was the greatest shock to those who would have staked their honour on it. It seemed incredible. Why, even on the Saturday before the bank closed its doors young Eric Hoddington had been seen in Westover in his new motor, splashing pedestrians with mud, expensively dressed and expensively appointed. He had stopped at the bank for a minute and had seen the farmers and small tradesmen coming in with their weekly turnover, and no least shade of gravity or regret had been on his face to warn them; indeed, he had greeted old Lillicrap, the blacksmith, off-handedly in passing: "Paying in your earnings like a thrifty man, Lillicrap? You're an example to us!"

And on Monday the bank had closed its doors!

All day there was a lingering crowd outside the familiar stucco entrance, eagerly waiting for news, hoping that someone might pass in or out who could be questioned. Sometimes a voice was raised in hysterical despair, a solitary shriek out of the vast trouble and disaster that was to come, but in the main men and women waited with white faces, incredulous or desperate. They could not lose their belief in Hoddington's all at once. It had stood to them for stolidity, the honour of a known name, and a moral trusteeship. It is not too much to say that the failure of Hoddington's Bank meant more of a

national misfortune to the smaller customers than did the great War.

For it was not only their savings that were gone, and unfortunately the bulk of the liabilities were represented by deposit accounts, but their faith in an unassailable institution. The Bank of England had not seemed so safe as Hoddington's, with its known and respected members of the family in charge of its concerns. Neither Eric nor his father had been much liked personally perhaps, but their name had not carried less financial weight for that. Old James Hoddington, with his air of aloofness and absorption in art collecting, Eric with his horses and motor-cars and his insolence, were both assets of the bank, and regarded as impregnable. And behold! they were nothing but gigantic frauds.

A kind of cold rage seized the people as the days went on and more and more of the causes which led to the failure leaked out. There was a meeting of creditors, and then talk of a lawsuit against the two partners for having carried on a business with public moneys, when they knew it to be insolvent. At the meeting of the creditors the crowd had exceeded anything that was expected, for when the day came the centre of Westover was filled with the people who had come to seek some requital for their wrongs, or to demand wild restitution that could not be made. The police were inadequate to the situation, the steps of the Town Hall where the meeting was to take place were black with heads, and the crowd gradually became audible as it pressed and swayed to get into the building. There was nothing but the bank failure talked of, the people reciting their wrongs to one another and bemoaning themselves. It was, on the

whole, an orderly crowd—a British crowd is generally that. But one was aware of the shrill excitement of women, and the horrible sound of cursing deep down in men's throats.

After a certain hour the public was admitted, and poured into the great hall; they packed the place, and stood deep in the entrance and close up to the platform, where sat the chairman of the meeting, Mr. Medlicott, and the chartered accountants who were appointed trustees. Last of all, Mr. James Hoddington and his son entered and sat down to face the meeting until such time as they must rise to address it. There was a snarl through the great hall at the sight of them, an angry murmur that in a less law-abiding community would have torn their clothes from their backs and tossed them to lynch law. Had it not been for Mr. Medlicott's presence as chairman, there might have been more demonstration, even as it was. But the County kept its hold upon the people of South Wessex, though it had just so sadly failed them in two of its recognized representatives.

There was a brief, business-like opening and statement of accounts. The bank, it appeared, had never been solvent since its first years of inauguration under Mr. Andrew Hoddington. It had been shaky at his death, and had required some skill to keep it afloat and to prevent its insolvency leaking out. But its accounts had never been audited, and being a private bank, there was no necessary Government return of its position. Mr. James Hoddington had succeeded to a denuded property on his father's death, but he had not thought it necessary to go into liquidation at the time. Stocks and shares might go up, the money market might recover, the bank might right itself

like a ship with a heavy list. In the meantime Mr. Hoddington had drawn an ample income from the bank, had paid his son another income as junior partner, and had spent thousands upon his collections of art treasures, while Eric bought blood horses and motor-cars. These things were too well known to mask. It was pleaded that Mr. Hoddington was bound to keep up his position and his son's in the County as they had always lived, and that to lower his own prestige was to lower the prestige of the bank. Had there been obvious economy it might have been whispered that there was something wrong, and the bank's fall would have been hastened.

But the people knew the causes of offence against them. The cynical cruelty of keeping Hoddington's open on that Saturday that their weekly earnings might go to swell the assets, and the closing on Monday morning! The money spent on *objets d'art* and the keeping up of Hoddington House—money which belonged to them and their children, for which they had slaved and toiled in times of agricultural depression, merely to support this County fetich in luxury! The mud from Eric's motor-car splashed upon them in derisive fancy, and soiled them that he might ride at ease. Traitors to their class, traitors to the loyal snobbery that had made of such as they a hallowed thing and an ideal, they stood a white-faced pair, facing the angry mob which interrupted them pitilessly when they tried to speak, and taunted them with recriminations as a mob will. The older man looked ashen in face, and at least was conscious of the humiliation of his position. Perhaps he hated the baiting of the crowd who individually had listened to him obsequiously up till now, and felt the sting of his

pride that such as he should have to justify himself to such as they. Even the furious audience noticed and commented on the old man's face as he stood stiffly by the table holding by the back of his chair, his eyes glassy and that curious leaden colour in his face.

"T'old man am feeling it!" said one to another, and "Serve him right!" muttered back various voices. "We shall feel it—we and our children. Iss! 'tis his turn to feel!"

Eric, on the contrary, had never lost his jaunty air of independence. His face was white also, as though he could not help feeling the strain, but his eyes glanced curiously right and left amongst the sea of faces below him, as though he found a certain casual interest in them.

"Poor devils!" he seemed to be saying. "I do not hold myself responsible for all this—but I am really awfully sorry for you!"

It was only in the lawful scheme of things that Eric Hoddington should have motor-cars and hunt with the Wessex Moorland, just as his father must keep up Hoddington House and bid at Christy's. If it came to a law-suit, he would plead that they had really done their best—even to the extent of some rash speculation with the funds at their disposal, the while they carried on business the same as usual. The spirit of the gambler was in both father and son, and with the infatuation of those who almost worship Chance they had not hesitated at desperate remedies in the hope of balancing their own losses.

But the explanation from the partners of the bank was not to be given on that historic afternoon, despite the hungry public; and it was left to the newspapers

to go slowly and laboriously into all the facts of the case and to inform the public that Hoddington's would pay five shillings in the pound, and that the family was technically ruined. The senior partner made three efforts to speak while the crowd murmured and jibed, and then being sharply called to order by the Chairman, they sank into silence and waited with lowering faces for James Hoddington's voice.

It never came. Still clinging to the chair back, and with that leaden face turned to the crowd, there came a hoarse sound in his throat like that of a strangling dog, and then the old man swayed forward and fell across the table at which the officials were sitting.

It was a sensational ending to the most sensational scene that Westover had ever known. A doctor from the crowd came up on to the platform, and with the aid of some others carried James Hoddington into an ante-room. Then Mr. Medlicott came back on to the platform and announced gravely that Mr. Hoddington had had a stroke, and that the meeting could not continue. Eric had been one of those to carry his father out, and went home with the unconscious figure to the house that was no longer theirs save by courtesy of the creditors of Hoddington's. By the time the crowd had pushed its way out of the hall again the two men they had come to face and accuse were gone, and there was nothing to vent their anger on but the empty street.

They were only half satisfied—some not at all. The poetical justice of it did not appeal to men robbed of their life earnings, and defrauded of their own thrift. It seemed as if once again the Hoddingtons had done them, father and son, and had gone off scot-free of retribution. Even if James Hoddington

died, the feeling would be the same—that he had failed to face his creditors and had escaped justice by a trick.

“Best thing he could do, to be stricken with illness,” said Lillicrap cynically. “But when a man’s robbed folk as Hoddington has, his life won’t pay them back, or keep a roof over their heads.”

For the first time in his life he had dropped the Mister, and spoke of the great banker as a man on his own level—ay ! and inferior by reason of dishonesty. He was the poorer by the loss of a standard, though he did not know it. Hoddington’s had not only robbed him of his home and the savings of a lifetime ; it had robbed him of his habit of looking up to the gentry, and making them an unconscious model whereby he tried to raise himself.

CHAPTER XII

"Dear Aunt! If I only would take her advice!
But I like my own way, and I find it so nice!
And besides, I forget half the things I am told;
But they all will come back to me—when I am old."

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES.

AMONGST the minor tragedies caused by the failure of Hoddington's Bank was that of Miss Johns. Her father had always banked with Hoddington's, and she had done so also as a matter of course. Her small income came in irregularly owing to the investments which Dr. Johns had made and which she had never altered, and in consequence she had some good quarters and some when her dividends were much smaller, the result being that she paid her bills in an erratic fashion, not when they came in so much as when she knew that she had a temporarily swollen balance. Fortunately, the tradesmen of Westover and Camp Rise knew her and were not disturbed, for she was, like most females, quite incapable of setting aside a certain sum when it was paid in to her account in order to settle her bills on demand.

The September quarter happened to be Miss Johns' most affluent time, because her largest dividends were paid in to her on the first of July, and her balance was further augmented in the present instance by a

bond having been redeemed and the money paid in to the bank. She was, of course, going to reinvest her capital, and had written to Hoddington's to have this done ; but in the meantime there was a hundred and fifty pounds credited to her account which went with everything else in the great smash.

That money represented her rent and her living to Miss Johns for the next three or four months, and the amount to be reinvested meant a very grave consideration to her, though the interest might be only a few pounds. People like Miss Johns live by pence and shillings, and are dependent for all the pleasures and graces of their lives upon what they can allow as a margin beyond necessities. For instance, if she had a tea-party she could never forget to calculate the price of the cakes or the extra butter for the toast, if she afforded a share in the " Penndragon " fly, it was a serious item of expenditure. Miss Johns could not afford to lose five pounds off her income, or even three.

The news was not broken to her at all, even by a sympathetic neighbour. She received the circular sent to all Hoddington's customers, and by some oversight she laid it aside unread with a sheaf of local advertisements ; but she read it next day over her neat little breakfast in the Westover daily paper as scores of other small householders did on that black Tuesday after the bank closed. Miss Johns had given up having a hot dish for breakfast since the War, except on Sundays, when the servants expected it, and she ate marmalade with her toast, or sometimes potted meat—a very little potted meat spread over very little butter. But she pushed away the meagre slices and the half-empty tea-cup after she had read the

statement of Hoddington's failure, and her face went the same ashen colour as James Hoddington's had been, only in a lesser degree.

She sat for some time over her neglected breakfast, to realize what this meant to her. Miss Johns knew all about economy, because she had been practising it all her life ; but she knew very little about the management of money, in spite of having had her lawyer to teach her after her father's death. He had been unusually shrewd over investments, and had not had that fatal leaning towards mortgages which besets most solicitors ; but he had not been able to make his client a worthy disciple. And, indeed, even had she been a skilled financier, it would have remained a problem as to what she was to live on for the next four months without further depleting her capital.

The one ghastly fact staring her in the face was that she might have to leave Trevena and go into rooms like Miss Noble. The loss of her little home and all her cravings after gentility meant as much to her as the loss of a husband or child might to another woman. She had never had the human ties, and the tendrils of her being had twined themselves round the inanimate things that represented so much to her. The cheerful little house and the two servants and the well-kept furniture and silver—they might all have to go. She glanced round her forlornly, and each piece of mahogany or china in the room seemed like a personal friend. She really did not know at the moment whether it was only the money on deposit that had gone, or the whole of her capital. Her affairs had been entirely in the hands of her lawyer, and whether her securities were at the bank or with him she did not remember.

Her hands trembled a little as she laid down the paper, and her eyes were full of tears.

"If my poor father had lived this could never have happened to me!" she kept saying to herself, with complete confidence in parental power to shield and succour. Her chief feeling was that she was so frightened, and that there was nobody to help her. "I ought to go and see Mr. Straughan, I suppose," she said in a bewildered fashion. "But I can never see him except by appointment. Or perhaps I ought to write—but I don't know what to say. If Hoddington's have failed, my money must have gone."

She folded up the paper guiltily and tried to appear as usual when Minnie came to clear the breakfast. She did not want the servants to know her disaster before they must, or to discuss it with them. It would be time enough when she had to tell them that she was giving up Trevena, she thought bitterly. But, of course, Minnie had heard the news from the milkman (Miss Johns had forgotten the milkman) and was all agog with it.

"What a dreadful thing about the bank, miss!" she said with a glance at her mistress's drawn face. "And hundreds of people ruined by it, they say. I hope you hadn't any money with them, miss."

"Nothing to speak of," said Miss Johns quietly. "Of course, one does not want to lose even a little, but we do not know yet what the failure means, or whether everything will not be paid up. It is a very old-fashioned bank—at least three generations of Hoddingtons have been in it, and they are such well-known people in the County!"

She was arguing to reassure herself as much as

Minnie, but the girl was not to be baulked of her sensation.

"Oh, but they have gone bankrupt, miss, those Hoddingtons!" she said virtuously. "And they've spent heaps and heaps of money on the style in which they lived. There won't be anything left for the poor people they've robbed!"

Miss Johns shivered again. She remembered going to Hoddington House once for a political meeting at the time of a General Election, and the size of the great rooms, the pictures, the statuary, and the rare and wonderful things in the cabinets. Then Eric's horses and cars had been the talk of Westover. There had been no check to extravagance with the Hoddingtons.

The day was like a bad dream to Miss Johns. She wrote to Mr. Straughan, but could not settle to anything, and kept looking at her familiar surroundings with a pang to think that they must all be packed away if not sold. She had been getting on so nicely in the neighbourhood of late, knowing quite nice people; but if she had to give up her house, she knew that she would lose it all and be of no more account than Miss Noble—without even the education. She hardly liked to order the dinner; it seemed so wrong to have anything from the tradesmen with no money at the bank to pay for it, but if she did not order she must have explained to the maids.

"If only poor father had lived!" she repeated miserably. "I have nobody to advise me really—nobody I can go to. And it seems so strange to think I may be homeless!" and her eyes filled with tears again. She was only one of many—very many—who were crying out against Hoddington's for the loss

of home and future ; but that did not make her personal tragedy less to her.

The mistress of Trevena had not meant to be at home to anybody that day, and, indeed, was in no state to receive visitors. Her eyes were red and her face was lined and white, and she had not changed the delaine blouse for the *crêpe-de-chine*, but had put on a holland overall and some leather gloves and was lovingly polishing her old Sheffield candlesticks in the dining-room. Somehow it comforted her to touch the things that she might no longer have round her, and she rubbed them up with tender care, perhaps for the last time.

"I can give up this house at the quarter," thought Miss Johns anxiously. "I know my landlord will release me—and it will let so easily!" Her breath came in a quick sigh. "Perhaps Mr. Straughan would advance me the money to carry on till September, if I dismissed one of the maids, and then I could pay it back when my dividends come in—if they ever do. Or I might go into rooms at once, if that would be cheaper." A tear splashed on to the Sheffield candlestick and dimmed its lustre.

Miss Johns was quite under the impression that she had told Minnie she was not at home ; but perhaps there was some misunderstanding, for in the middle of her task the dining-room door opened, as if it were the ordinary thing for visitors to be shown in there, and Mr. Wise was announced. Afterwards, when her mistress asked her why she had not shown him into the drawing-room at least, Minnie said that the room had been turned out that morning, and that Miss Johns had not put the china back. Miss Johns felt that she was the culprit, having allowed her

wits to go wool-gathering with her trouble, for she always removed her old Chelsea and Worcester out of the room herself on cleaning days, and put it back with her own hands. Nor did it occur to her that Minnie was very glib with her excuse, and quite ready for the question.

Wise had come to thank his champion, having learned by some mysterious method that she had vindicated his character at the Hut. He walked into the room with his usual *sang-froid*, indifferent to Miss Johns' overall and occupation (perhaps ladies in Canada clean their own plate before visitors?), but he hesitated in a most unusual fashion at the sight of his hostess's face.

"Are you in trouble?" he asked gently, sitting down beside her at the table. "I came to thank you for standing up for your graceless nephew—but my own concerns can wait. Tell me the news."

"It is nothing—at least, it is very much to me," said Miss Johns, with a catch in her breath, fumbling at her gloves to get them off. "The bank smash—I suppose you have heard of it?"

"Yes," said Wise quickly. "But you hadn't money there, had you?"

"Almost half my income," said Miss Johns, and the tears dropped very quietly and pitifully on the Sheffield plate. "A third of it, at least. And some money that belongs to my capital." She turned her dim eyes to his concerned face and her hands were trembling. "I feel so lonely!" she confessed in a whisper. "If my dear father had lived, I am sure that this could not have happened. And I have no one to depend on now——"

He did not smile at the curious faith in the late

Dr. Johns' power to avert such a calamity as the bank failure. He saw with a quicker sympathy than most men of his age that here was a woman born and bred in dependence upon masculine authority and guardianship, and that she had been cruelly deprived of it by an ill-fate. She was frightened—that was the piteous thing to him. Not angry or rebellious against the fraud of Hoddington's like the small tradespeople and the farmers were, but bewildered and very frightened.

"Oh, Lord!" he said. "Why are there not enough men in England to go round?"

There was a little pause while Miss Johns cried comfortably, with a sense of relief that she had someone with whom to share her trouble, though it was only odd Mr. Wise. He did not seem at all upset by her tears, but after a time she found herself pouring forth the lamentation that had been in her heart all day, and telling him how she would have to leave Trevena, and give up her nice maids and all her little dainty ways of life—that pathetic snobbishness that imitated those whom she thought better off, and was ambitious of all gracious and desirable things. She even confessed the excursion to London and the dressing-jacket and bath-cap, and how wrong it seemed now!—just because she had wanted to rival a duchess.

"And I don't feel that I *could* sit down to a horrid chop in the same sitting-room I have lived in all day, like Miss Noble does," she confessed. "Without even a table centre!"

"Oh, no, Auntie, you mustn't leave Trevena, and you must certainly have the table centre!" said Wise caressingly. "I love Trevena—I've been as happy as a king here. I shouldn't like to think of you with-

out all your knick-knacks round you, and, of course, you must wear the dressing-jacket—you will look charming in it ! You must put it on when I am coming to tea.” He had sidled his chair nearer to Miss Johns, and was patting her on the shoulder. Really he was a very kind young fellow, she thought, in spite of his unconventional ways—or perhaps because of them. Her trouble seemed to have made it quite natural for him to assume the ways of a real nephew, and she had a return of that feeling when she first confided her aspiration to him for a male relative in the Service. The strong khaki-clad arm round her might have been that of a big son, and though she did not quite know how it got there, she let it stay.

“Where are your securities—the investments you have made ? ” he asked with business-like directness. “Who has charge of them ? They are not at the bank, are they ? ”

“No, I think Mr. Straughan, my solicitor, has most of them—and there was some inscribed stock that one doesn’t have at all, does one ? ” she added with beautiful vagueness. “I was not sure, earlier in the day, but I quite think now that Mr. Straughan has them.”

He smiled at her encouragingly. “Come ! that’s better,” he said. “They can’t have been speculating with your capital. Now, Auntie”—he had begun to coax—“you are going to do me a great favour. You are going to accept a loan from me—just to carry you over the worst of this, you know. Yes, please ! because you stood up for me the other day, and you did me a great service.”

But that shocked Miss Johns almost back into conventionality again.

"Oh, no, thank you, Mr. Wise, I couldn't. I should never have confided in you if I had thought of such a thing. A young man like you has not money to lend to anybody but his own relatives."

"But you are my relative!" The long-lashed eyes were irresistible with that expression in them, and the voice would have wheedled the keys out of Peter at the gate of Heaven. "Now make a clean breast of it—how much have you lost?"

"A hundred and fifty pounds!" said Miss Johns solemnly, more to show him the impossibility of the thing than because he asked her.

"Oh, then I can let you have a hundred at once, and the rest I can get at in a day or so," he said cheerfully. "I'll write you a cheque—no, you'd rather have notes, wouldn't you?" he added thoughtfully. "And you must go into Westover and open an account at one of the joint-stock banks there—not a private one again, mind! And we'll forget all about Hod-dington's."

"But, my dear boy"—Miss Johns really had not meant to say that, but he was taking her by storm—"I should have no chance of paying back the money unless my securities are safe and I can realize them, even if you ought to lend it to me. You might hamper yourself for months."

"No, I shan't," he said carelessly. "I can get more where that came from. I—won it at cards!" he asserted, with a sidelong flash of his eyes under the lashes.

Miss Johns was both startled and troubled. She remembered hearing vaguely that Gilbert Wise was rumoured to be a gambler, and the cool way in which he had spoken of a hundred pounds, and fifty to

follow, and then more to be made, seemed to confirm the report. She could not encourage him in evil courses, but she could not help a little glow of comfort at the kindness he was showing, and the feeling of being protected by someone young and strong.

"That sounds a very large sum to have won at cards," she said timidly. "I am afraid they must play very high at Camp!"

"Well, but, Auntie, if I can play better than other fellows, why shouldn't they pay me? The money is just as well in my pocket as in theirs—and better still in yours!"

She had a suspicion that there was a twinkle in his eyes now, and a streak of mischief in his voice, and she drew herself up a little.

"I could not ask you to make money in such a way, even though you are more than good in offering to lend to me," she said. "And, indeed, I do appreciate it—you are the only person in the world, I believe, who would have offered!"

"You don't like the idea of the money being won at cards?" he said with quick intuition. "I believe you think I am a gambler!" She was uneasily silent. "Very well," said Gilbert Wise quietly. "I didn't make it at cards—though I do play bridge better than most of the duffers at Camp. I'll tell you the truth about my affairs, Auntie—only you must keep it to yourself. Now look here—read that," and he took a foreign envelope with strange post-marks on it from his pocket and laid it before her. It seemed to have followed him from one continent to another, to judge from its re-directions. . . .

Half an hour later Miss Johns rang the dining-room bell and ordered tea.

"I really feel I should like my tea now," she said with a sigh of relief that was almost exhaustion. "I ate hardly any breakfast or luncheon."

"Then it was a lucky thing I happened to drop in to-day, or you would certainly have starved."

"I do hope I am not doing wrong in accepting this from you——"

"Oh, Auntie, we settled that twenty minutes ago!"

"But it is like a new lease of life. Oh, what a load off me! And then perhaps I shall be the indirect means of doing you a kindness, too, and bringing about a reconciliation!"

He looked at her with affectionate, smiling eyes. "That's right, Auntie," he said. "You stick to that track and don't worry. Women were not meant to bear burdens alone; you shift them on to my shoulders and we'll both be happy."

When Minnie came in with the tea she found Miss Johns laughing—positively laughing—because Mr. Wise had appropriated the leather gloves and was giving a final polish to the candlesticks. He was probably making eyes at the Sheffield plate as he did so, and he certainly made eyes at Minnie as she laid the five-o'clock table-cloth cornerwise on the table.

"Impudent young spark!" said Minnie in the kitchen. "But he has done the mistress good. She was looking so as I thought she was going to be ill before he came. That's why I let him in!"

CHAPTER XIII

" I'm wife ; I've finished that,
That other state ;
I'm Czar, I'm woman now ;
It's safer so.

" How odd the girl's life looks
Behind this soft eclipse !
I think that earth seems so
To those in heaven now."

EMILY DICKENSON.

A WARM night in August—one of those few Summer nights that blessed England in the second year of the War—the stars shining over Meary Down, and hardly a breath to rustle the plantations round Meary House. The cuckoo had gone back to southern lands, too fickle to stay in the hemisphere that he had flattered in the Spring ; but his work was done. There was a shadow moving under the old stone wall outside the plantation, and the sound of a quick breath that told of listening ears waiting for something—a signal ? a light step on the inside of the wall ?

Nothing broke the stillness save the call of an owl somewhere at hand, a plaintive little call that sounded more like a lover than a marauder. " Two-wo ! Two-woo-oe ! " he complained, but no doubt he was hoping to rob somebody's hen-roost of a young chick.

There were more robbers than one abroad that night. Then a fox yapped in derision—the sort of yap that knows the hunting season is over for the nonce, and that the keepers may not take vengeance on him! A minute later he jumped cat-like up on the old wall, caught sight of that sentinel figure, and instead of crossing Meary Down to an outlying farm, as he intended, jumped back again and doubled along inside the plantation. It was far too late for human beings to be about, spoiling the chances of an honest fox, whose supper was still to get; but here was someone coming on the inside of the wall this time.

Gilbert Wise sensed the approach of another person almost as quickly as the fox had done. He stood still, rigid, outside the wall, and listened. First there came a hesitating movement, then the sound of a stone dislodged from the wall—an alarmed silence—then another effort that made the knotted ivy bend beneath a light weight, and a girl's figure kneeling on the top of the wall before she trusted the descent on the other side. He moved forward with outstretched arms and swung her down, and for a minute the two distinct human personalities seemed to merge into each other.

“A charming night—a perfect night for an adventure!” whispered Wise gaily, holding her closely to him, and the two pairs of lips might be pardoned their surfeit of kisses after the long abstinence. “Did you lock your door?”

“Yes—”

“And no one heard?”

“I got out by the window!” Primrose confessed with a little shamed laugh. “It seemed safer than

going through the house, and I could not be sure of even a side entrance being open."

"You might have had a fall!" he exclaimed anxiously. "And, anyhow, you have cut and scratched your pretty hands." He laid his lips against them fondly, kissing the torn and broken skin.

"I don't mind that—but I am horribly frightened!"

"If they did not hear you we have seven or eight hours clear. They will not raise an alarm until the morning. We have ample time to catch the train, and a perfect walk over Meary Down. Have you ever been on Meary Down so late, Primrose Day?"

"Later, coming home from a party."

"But not on foot, out for a walk, with all the rest of your world asleep! The foxes and we have it all to ourselves. Give me your hand and let us step out."

He led her stealthily from the shadow of the wall, and struck out across the rough grass. It was not a dark night, but they went carefully and without hurry, the scent of heather bruised by their feet seeming to rise up all about them. The girl's hand trembled a little in Wise's close clasp and her breath came short, but she was experiencing a kind of terrified enjoyment. The free sky over her head, and the lawless earth around her, with one man out of all the world to guard her steps! She knew the joy of the vagrant for the first time, and it seemed to her that she was some new person who had forgotten what it was like to be within four walls.

"I wish we were gipsies!" she said suddenly in a soft, happy little voice. "I should like to sleep out here under the stars, and never go home!"

"Ah, Primrose Day, don't tempt me!" he breathed

with a half-angry tenderness. "A summer night on Meary Down with you—a nest to share with my bird! What should a man ask more of life? Come—here's the prosaic road; see if you can run a little."

They started running on the hard surface that cut the Down like a ribbon from Westover out to St. Mary Ope, and beyond that out to Weststock. Their faces were towards Camp Rise, and after a while they stopped, breathless and laughing, at the edge of the Down.

"We were nearly in the culverts a dozen times!" said Wise. "We must go soberly now, for I want to stop at one of those cottages down there."

The little row of grey stone dwellings was nothing but a darker blot upon the night, but in one of them was the twinkle as of a very faint star. Somebody was awake and burning a candle. Still holding Primrose by the hand, Wise slipped through the garden patch and gave a single tap on the window. The door opened silently, and they went in, to find themselves in a queer little room such as only the very poor inhabit. There was a low, narrow bed with a ragged covering, a deal table where the candle was burning, and an old empty basket. Charley's basket appeared to be his most cherished possession since his living depended on it, and the rest of his goods and chattels must have been in the cupboard beside the rickety fireplace, for Primrose saw nothing of them. She was not looking at the room, however, but at the old man himself. She had never seen him without his hat before, and his strange eyes seemed to light up his face with more than their usual elfinness. He smiled at her, and would have withdrawn into the passage, but Wise stopped him.

"Did Jonathan pass here to-day, Charley?"

"Yes, and left the parcel for you," said Charley with a little nod. He seemed perfectly acquiescent and approving of this strange elopement, and its raid upon his cottage room, and proceeded to bring a brown paper parcel out of the cupboard and to untie it by Wise's directions.

"Now, Primrose, I'm going to effect a little alteration in you!" he said mischievously, as Charley shook out a long grey cloak and Nurse's bonnet and veil. "Slip into these things while I get ready."

He produced a small pencil from his pocket, such as actors and actresses use for making up, a dark smooth wig, and a box of rouge. With the aid of a hare's foot he brushed her pale cheeks with a slight colour, darkened her brows and lashes with the pencil, and pressed the dark wig over her fair soft hair. The effect was to make her look suddenly older, and more self-confident, and when the cloak and bonnet were adjusted, it was a more efficient disguise than if she had muffled herself up and worn a thick veil. Anyone could look her in the face—and yet it was Primrose's face no longer. Lady Gracia or the General must have looked twice to be quite sure.

All the time old Charley had stood by looking on, with the amusement of some wise old gnome or fairy.

"Ah! now no one will recognize you, Madam!" he said. "I could not myself. You will take good care of her, sir." The quiet confidence of the words was not a question.

"I give you my word of honour, Charley," said Wise in answer. "But don't ever tell anybody that we stopped here to-night. Even Jonathan does not know, I merely told him that I should call for the parcel."

"Are you going to walk all the way to Westover to catch the train, Gilbert?" said Primrose anxiously. "Surely we shall not have time!"

"Oh, no; we are going to bicycle!" said Wise gaily. "I left the machines in Lillicrap's garden; but he does not know that they are there."

He opened the door with so little sound that she hardly heard it, but before she left the poor little room she held her hand to Charley, and her eyes were full of light and mist together.

"God bless you, little Madam!" he said simply. "Your gentleman will stand true to you, or I would have had no hand in this night's work."

"I can trust him," said Primrose, and followed him out into the night.

They met no one on the stretch of road between Charley's cottage and the inn. The lights were all out in the "'Dragon," everybody asleep long since; but Primrose stood in the shadow of the wall while Wise went over to the forge and swung himself over the garden fence. He was some minutes lifting the bicycles over from the spot where he had left them, and then he came back, wheeling them across the road.

"What will you do with them at the station?" Primrose asked in some dismay, arranging her cloak so that it should cover but not hamper her on the machine. They mounted and began to run smoothly over the familiar road, past the Vicarage, where in her wildest dreams Mrs. Thornhill never visioned who was passing by—past Trevena itself, and the high cold gates of the Warren, and through Camp, which lay as if deserted in the utter stillness. Even had they been seen, there was nothing to note but a man in

khaki riding back to Westover very late with a nurse in uniform. Such things had been done before, and would be done again by men on leave.

"I shall dump them in the cloak-room, where I have to go to get some traps I left," said Wise coolly. "But I shall not be able to travel in the same carriage with you, I am afraid. Does the guard know you?"

"I am afraid that all the officials in Westover know us."

"He won't know you like that, and I shall put you in his care!" said Wise with an audacious laugh.

"Oh, Primrose, what a beautiful time we are having! Did you ever think that you would run away with someone in the middle of the night?"

† No, she had never thought of such dear madness, and even now her heart beat to realize her recklessness. But this strange Primrose who followed Gilbert Wise seemed to be one he had bewitched that morning in May, when they rode together into Fairyland. She had vowed then to follow wherever he should lead her, and his wayward guidance had brought her to flying through the midnight world with him disguised into something utterly unlike herself, pledged to further strange happenings before it was all over. She began to anticipate that all her life with Gilbert Wise would be subject to adventure, out of the beaten track of her future as it had seemed certain before meeting him.

They rode into Westover by by-roads, which were decently asleep between the drawn blinds of houses. Everybody in the ordinary, orderly world seemed to be asleep, and only those two lovers were awake in their wild escapade. There was no traffic in those quiet streets, and when they drew near to the big

station of the big town they dismounted and walked side by side, Wise wheeling the bicycles.

"You look so different that I feel as if I had got a strange girl with me!" he said saucily. "We must have met on the road, and we shall have to begin the acquaintance all over again. Are you fond of cigarettes, Miss Stranger, or do you think smoking wrong for girls?"

"Gilbert—don't! I have lost my identity as it is."

"You remind me of a girl I knew once—in Alberta," he teased her. "I did not realize that colouring could make such a likeness. She was very different to you in all ways, I thought. But now I shall have to treat you as if you were she!" He began to hum, and she recognized the tune with a little pang:

"The robin's on the wing again; I hear the song of Spring again!"

"I shall never be sure of him!" thought her woman's soul in despair. "All my happiness is in his hands—and it is insecure. But oh! I would rather take the risk, since Fate brought him into my life." But there was no betrayal of this in her soft misty eyes under the darkened brows and lashes, only a little added dignity and composure in her manner.

"Will you tell me what to do now, Gilbert?"

"Go and get your ticket—you are travelling independently, remember. And then wait on the platform as much away from other people as you can. There might be somebody going up by the midnight express that you know, but it is unlikely. I shall see you into the train." His voice was more rapid and direct, as though he dropped his dare-devilry to give orders. She bit her underlip to prevent it trembling, and

did as he told her with the submission of a child. The gentleman taking his ticket at the booking-office before her was known to her by sight—another man, a tradesman, passed her as she went on to the platform, her heart beating to suffocation. But thanks be to the War! the lights were few and shaded, and as she stood apart in her nurse's uniform, no one did anything more than glance at her. The very rashness of Gilbert Wise's plan made it incredibly successful. Primrose Templeton was supposed to be safely asleep in her room in Meary House; even if a pursuit had been started, it would have been impossible to trace the fugitives by any vehicle. No motor had been ordered at any of the garages, no cart hired. He was himself supposed to have gone up to London on leave earlier in the day, and when he arrived to catch the midnight train, it was not even in the company of the uniformed nurse, who looked older and whose description did not tally with that of Primrose.

Wise had left the bicycles in the parcels office, as he had said he would, and stopped to speak to the guard of the midnight as he came out. The man knew him, and remembered his last journey to London for various satisfactory reasons. Wise had a faculty for making unlikely friends.

"Going up again about your arm, sir?" he said sympathetically. "Hope you're not having trouble with it."

"It's Sir Jasper Sprague who is making trouble," said Wise carelessly. "He's a fuss-pot. But he's done me a good turn in getting me three days' leave again so soon."

"Not a very pleasant errand though, sir."

"I'll manage to get something out of it!" said Wise,

with his sidelong smile. "Oh, by the way, guard, there's a lady going up who I know slightly—a nurse. There she is, in uniform. I wish you'd reserve her carriage and give the poor girl a chance to sleep. She'll have to go straight to her case in London."

"I will, sir—I'll make it a ladies' carriage. You'd better take your seat, Mr. Wise, if you want a comfortable corner."

Wise walked across the platform to Primrose. "The guard has promised to give you a ladies' compartment, Miss Stranger," he said, saluting. "I thought you ought to get all the sleep you can, as you have to take the midnight. Will you come and settle yourself? I shall be next door."

Then she saw that he carried a small suit-case in his hand and a travelling rug. "I'll put your things in with you," he said. "I suppose Miss Stranger can have her suit-case in the carriage, guard?"

"That's all right, miss," said the guard good-humouredly. "We shan't say anything about that."

He opened the door of a first-class carriage that he had labelled "Ladies," but he left Mr. Wise to arrange for the girl's comfort and tuck the rug over her, and discreetly withdrew with a knowing smile. Wise drew the shade over the light, and opening the suit-case took out a small travelling cushion and made Primrose lie down on the seat. Then he drew down the blinds of the carriage and kissed her.

"Sleep well, Primrose Day!" he said gently. "I am next door to you if you want anything. I mustn't stay with you—to-night. But after to-morrow there won't be any more partitions to keep us apart!"

The faint fixed rouge on her face was flooded over

by the bright blood rising to her startled eyes. She turned her face to the padded back of the carriage like a child, and made him laugh. His laughter was the last she had of him for the next few hours, for she dropped asleep with it in her ears, though she was fully convinced she would not close her eyes. He was so near her—her happy heart beat time to her consciousness of him—and after to-morrow he would be nearer still. She was not in the least remorseful or conscience-stricken as yet over her rebellion against parental authority, for she had been slowly but surely roused to anger and antagonism against her father and mother by the control they thought to exercise over her destiny. Like all pliant and docile people with any character of their own, Primrose was liable to much more sudden and startling rebellion than a more tiresome and headstrong girl would have been. It seemed to her that her parents had become tyrants, and she was too ignorant and inexperienced to realize the pain and disappointment she was causing them. Once or twice of late she had tried to re-open the question of Gilbert Wise, and she had been laughed down, ignored, or absolutely censured. Put out of court, indeed. Then she had hardened, and it had all ended in the desperate remedy of running away with Wise to ensure her own happiness. With the egotism of the very young she had seen nothing but her own life and its necessity, and all other claims took a secondary place. She was ready to face the future with him, and still too resentful to harbour any misgivings as to her adventure with fortune.

The guard, looking in on her from time to time, found her peacefully sleeping, the smooth dark head resting on the improvised pillow, the dark lashes

resting on the pink cheeks. But the shaded light failed to betray any familiarity of her face to him, and when the express reached Paddington he saw her departing under the escort of Lieutenant Wise without a thought of stopping her or the least doubt of her right to travel independently. It was daybreak in London, but the two runaways had yet some hours of security before there arose a stir in Meary House, and a cry that rang through Primrose's little empty room to tell of her flight.

CHAPTER XIV

"How strong, how vast, how awful seems the power
Of this new love that fills a maiden's heart,
For one who never bore a single hour
Of pain for her ; which tears her life apart
From all its moorings, and controls her more
Than all the ties the years have held before."

E. WHEELER WILCOX.

IT seemed that sensation after sensation was to break the usual routine and monotony of Camp Rise. People had not done talking of the bank failure before they were rendered breathless again by the elopement of Lady Gracia's daughter with Gilbert Wise. Over the little tea-tables and the bridge parties tongues wagged, and the wildest stories were rife until certain well-founded statements evolved themselves from the gossip, and the rumours that Miss Templeton had married an escaped criminal, a German spy, and a mere adventurer, were dismissed before the plain facts of the case.

Gilbert Wise was not a Canadian at all, though he had enlisted in a Canadian regiment when the War broke out, being at that time in the Dominion. He was the only son of quite a good family (I speak as Camp Rise!) in the Midlands ; but since everybody had decided that he was a Canadian, they had never

thought to connect him with Wise of Whoddon. He belonged to the untitled aristocracy of England; and was quite as much "County" as the Medlicotts or the Warres, or General Templeton himself. But the devil of perversity had been in Gilbert from a child, and instead of settling down into a great landowner and country squire, like his father, he must needs hanker after the joys of liberty, and sowed such wild oats as ended in a quarrel and his being bidden not to return to Whoddon until he came as the repentant prodigal. He had a harsh breaking-in in his lust for the Wanderlure, and had experienced much that he would probably never betray, though it had written its story on that irregular, captivating face of his. As he had told Miss Johns and Primrose, he had been for six months on the stage, using his voice for a living; what else he had or had not been it would be difficult to say, but after a second fracas with his family, he was shipped off to Canada to a connection of his mother's, who was farming in Alberta. Like many rolling stones, Gilbert gained no moss save that of fresh experience, and when the War broke out he enlisted, with the consent of his Canadian kinsman, who had acquired a grim liking for the young scapegrace. The War was a further education, since he learned his service in the ranks, and saw the naked realities of life and death; but the mention of his name amongst the wounded (how they must have looked for it, through all that rank and file!) brought him a stern, kindly letter from his father, offering to treat him once more as a son if he would ask pardon for the past, and to make him a suitable allowance on his obtaining his commission. It was this letter that he had shown to Miss Johns, though he had not yet

taken advantage of it ; the money he insisted on giving her as a loan having come from his old farmer cousin in Canada. Neither Gilbert nor his father liked the taste of Humble Pie, but the young man had become reconciled to his people, and was in possession of an ample allowance before he asked Primrose Templeton to run away with him. He had been frank about the differences with his family to the General, but he had not made him understand that he was a son of Wise of Whoddon. The old perversity in Gilbert made him obstinate to stand on his own merits, and on those terms the Templetons looked at him askance. He was quite eligible as a suitor for Primrose by birth and position as the heir to Whoddon, but he had only dwelt on the monetary side of his prospects.

"My father will allow me a thousand a year, sir, upon our being reconciled," he said at that fatal interview when he was forbidden Meary House. "He is a rich man for his position, and I am the only son."

And it was then that the General had said that whatever Mr. Wise's prospects might be, in the present or the future, he would not be welcome as a son-in-law. He was under the impression that the thousand a year derived its source from Canada, and that the young man's immediate forbears were pioneer-farmers and Colonists. Gilbert did not undeceive him.

"To think of that bread-and-milk girl bolting with Gilbert Wise!" said Tina Medlicott in comment. "I should not have credited her with the pluck. Wish I'd done it myself, whether he were Wise of Whoddon or Wise of Nowhere."

"He didn't ask you!" said her sister with a brutal logic.

“No, worse luck. Any girl would have gone with him to the devil if he had made love to her—except perhaps Primrose Templeton. If anyone had asked me, I should have nominated her as the one who wouldn’t. The old General and Lady Gracia ought to be jolly thankful he’s all right, considering what they think of birth!”

But, curiously enough, the General and his wife were not consoled in the least by their son-in-law’s connections, and it added another sting to know that they had no adequate reason for refusing to acknowledge the marriage. For the sake of appearances, they must appear to have accepted it, and meet the young couple; but they were not reconciled, and Primrose, on her side, was not repentant.

“Never mind,” said Miss Hannah Noble shrewdly, when Miss Johns confided the real facts of the case to her. “She will forgive her mother when her child is born, and go back to her.”

Miss Johns found herself an authority and much questioned on the subject of the elopement, for she knew more of Gilbert Wise than anybody else. But beyond confirming the fact of his being an Englishman and of “quite decent family,” she was discreet in her answers. She talked more to Miss Noble than to anyone else of her pseudo “nephew” and his wife, because everybody who knew her had the comforting conviction that confidences were quite safe with Miss Noble. Nobody could quite say why, but Miss Johns had a vague impression that it was because she had been a governess, and was so well educated. Governesses learn to hold their tongues, and people with well-developed brains may be supposed to be above gossip—a very complaisant error. Miss Johns con-

... "One of ourselves," said the County. "What a dreadful thing to have happened in a family so well known in South Wessex! And we must stand by our Order."

"What shocks me," Lady Gracia confided to the General, "is the memory of that dinner-party when Primrose came of age. Do you remember? He was telling me about Mr. Wise's play at bridge, and he said that for his part he could not understand a man gambling. And all the while he and his father were nothing but gamblers themselves!"

"I hear that he still goes to the Warren," said the General. "I suppose they do not like to close their doors to him in his misfortune."

"And to the Manor," said Lady Gracia. "Nothing is proved against him yet, you see, except that he is heavily censured for what was really dishonest dealing. But then he was under his father, who was mainly responsible."

"And James Hoddington is dead!" said the General dryly. "One might as well go and kick his tombstone as censure him. It was a great pity he was known to have spent so much on art collecting." But he did not say that it was a great pity that he had spent so much on it.

"And that Eric had all those horses and cars!" said Lady Gracia. "It seems to have struck at the very root of the social system, and everything is altering. It is not only the War—people may say what they like, but that would never have made any permanent difference."

"It has altered the Army," said the General rather grimly. "And that will never be the same again as we knew it!"

“ They tell me that Colonel Warre—Mrs. Warre’s brother-in-law, you know—is trying to get Eric Hoddington a commission, as he may have to join up very shortly. Can you believe it ? ”

“ It is exactly what I should have expected ! ” snorted the General. “ And I have no doubt he will be welcome in any Mess—unless there really is a trial and it went against him.”

“ If the smash had not come when it did—if they had gone on a year or so longer,” said Lady Gracia, with an honesty that did her credit, “ he might have married Primrose. I am sure that was what he intended. We should not have liked it, but we should have had nothing to urge against him. And that would have been worse than things as they are ! ”

She looked suddenly downcast, and as if robbed of her self-reliance. Perhaps some glimmering of the uncertainty of all guarded futures struck across the convictions in which she had been reared, and made her humble. The General seemed to have aged a good deal since his daughter’s hasty marriage, and she had a misgiving that the same might be said of her. There was only one hand in the world that could have struck them such a blow, and that had been the one to deal it. They were two old, tired people, with a perfectly genuine belief in the obligations of that state of life to which it had pleased God to call them, and they had tried to fulfil them both for themselves and their daughter. The sense of failure left them pathetically bewildered, for it almost seemed as if Providence itself had found them and their system wanting.

“ She might have treated *me* as unnaturally as she

pleased," thought Lady Gracia. " But I should have expected her to show some consideration for her father ! "

And the General was thinking exactly the same for his wife.

CHAPTER XV

"Tell him that my love for you,
No less than my love for him,
Wrought out my destiny—that through the flesh
I won spirit, and through spirit, peace.
There is no marriage in heaven,
But there is love."

EDGAR LEE MASTERS.

WINTER came early to South Wessex that year. Before Christmas the frosts had been heavy, and there had been a fall of snow. Now South Wessex boasts that up to Christmas you may look for open weather, and that the hunting will only be stopped for a fortnight in January. As the cold had come so early the Winter was supposed to be practically over by the New Year, and everybody looked for an early Spring.

But South Wessex will not soon forget the great frost of January, 1917, nor the snow that blocked the road across Meary Down, and made it almost impossible for any traffic save that of motors. The villages were cut off, and the shallow pools of the Ope were frozen over, while the drifts in the lowlands of Ducketts filled the deep lanes.

"Oh, it's a sad time for me, Madam!" said old Charley, with a little shake of his snowy shoulders, meeting Miss Hannah Noble outside the "Penn-

dragon." Charley's old coat was as variegated as Joseph's, though its colours were limited to drabs and browns, and he shivered as he stood in the wintry wind.

"I can't think how you live, Charley!" said Miss Noble, leaning on her stick and looking half enviously at the smiling eyes in the old man's wrinkled face. "The cold finds all of us old folks out. I am a mass of sore bones! Ugh! England is only fit for a burial ground."

"Don't say that, Madam! The Spring must come some time, and bring the primroses. And I know a sheltered corner where I hope to find some ivy even now."

"What will you do if the ivy fails you, Charley?" said Miss Noble, feeling stealthily in her pocket, for she knew that the Vicar did not approve of chance charity, and thought she ought to contribute to the Additional Curates' Fund. Miss Noble shamelessly pleaded poverty—and then tipped old Charley on the road.

"Why, then, I must go into the House for a bit, Madam—but I hope to keep my old room a little longer."

Miss Noble slipped something into his hand with an abstracted air, and told him to bring her some cresses as soon as the weather broke and they were obtainable. It was a month or two before she was to see that cress, but Charley did not forget. He went into the Workhouse when the frost took away his living and he had used up all his Summer savings; but the laundresses did not let his room to anyone else, and when he struggled back on to the road again in March, Miss Noble got the first bunch of cress that

he brought up from the West Brook. She had so entirely forgotten her furtive charity to him that she could not imagine why he had paid her the attention for some time. But to her great and unhallowed joy Mr. Thornhill preached that Sunday on the text, "Cast thy bread upon the waters," the collection being for the Curate Fund. Miss Noble passed the plate, and explained to the Vicar that she had found practical demonstration of his sermon elsewhere.

Whatever other traffic was stopped the Camp Rise Express still plied its trade over the snowy roads, and carried many a pile of firewood to cold hearths and coalless grates. Jonathan and his donkeys could go where heavier carts and horses could not get a hold, and his wild yell was a welcome sound to the cottages and scattered dwelling-places beyond Camp. It took all six donkeys to pull a full load up the hills, and the little fellows looked more ragged and depressed than ever. But the probability is that they felt the sting of the Winter less than the horses, in their shaggy coats, and Jonathan fed them well according to his means.

The cold seemed to culminate in the first days of February. The Camp Rise Express was coming across Meary Down one afternoon after a fresh fall of snow that had blotted the road into the Down and left nothing but wavy outlines for landmarks. One or two motor tracks showed that cars had been through St. Mary Ope on their way to Weststock, but it seemed to Jonathan that there was really nothing in the universe but himself and his donkeys and the snow. Fortunately for the team the truck was empty, a load of firewood having been eagerly purchased in St. Mary's earlier in the day, and the little donkeys were plodding home with cheerful energy, knowing shelter

and supper before them. Now and then even one of the sure-footed six slipped in the snow, which was up to their fetlocks, and then a roar rent the air from Jonathan, meant perhaps for encouragement, but liable to awake dire misgivings in the heart of a member of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. "Captain—Trigger—Flo—Moss—Fanny—POLL!" he yelled, and there came a universal jerk on the chains and a little more thrust into the straw bundles of collars. Nevertheless, Jonathan was not adding his huge frame to the donkeys' light burden, but stalked along beside them in the snow; and the curious procession, flanked by the great man with his stick under his arm, threw weird shadows upon the frozen whiteness, for the sun was going down and shone from a clear frosty sky.

As Jonathan eased his team for a minute at the top of the stiffest hill, he saw that he was, after all, not alone upon Meary Down, as he had fancied. For there was another figure on the road before him, some way in front, and apparently finding it no easy tramp from the irregular track it took. At first it had only been a dark thing upon the white road, of uncertain outline, and he took it for a moorland pony strayed on to the road in desperate need of food; but as he came faster down the near side of the hill, it resolved itself into the outlines of a stout woman, whose large loose coat was flapping about her in the wind and increasing her size. She lurched once or twice and seemed unsteady on her feet, but whether from drink or the slippery road he could not tell. He lost her again over the next hill, where the donkeys pulled slowly, for the road across Meary Down is like a switchback railway, and when he next saw her she was sitting

in the snow by the roadside. Either she had fallen or was resting regardless of consequences, but as he got close to her, he saw that she was panting—saw also why he had thought her a stout woman from her too bounteous outline. She wore an old loose ulster, such as factory hands affect, to disguise her coming motherhood, and a battered velvet hat was pulled so low over her face, that Jonathan could see nothing of it as her head lay forward on her arms.

“Here, missus! better get on to the truck, and we’ll give you a lift!” said Jonathan, swinging round the conveyance and stooping to help the sick woman to her feet. Then she raised her face, pinched with pain and very drawn and cold, with every trace of youth and beauty beaten out of it, and he uttered an exclamation:

“Lottie! Farden-faced Joe’s Lottie!”

“Iss, and gone to hell!” said the girl in a reckless hoarse voice. “Yu didn’t know who it was yu was offerin’ a lift, did yu, Jonathan?”

“Noa—but I’ll give you one, none the less,” said the donkey-man stolidly. “Your time’s pretty near—you’d best be getting home to your father,” he added practically, with no hesitation for the obvious straits in which Lottie had come home. The poor do not stop to think of disgrace or conventional morals in such urgent cases. Jonathan did not even yield to the temptation of “the word in season,” though his habit of preaching made it likely. His principal concern was that Lottie should not fall ill on his hands, and he be hindered from getting home.

But the girl was sullenly determined not to go to her father with her shame. She had set out as on a high adventure, flaunting her future in the face of

the whole neighbourhood, and now that it had come to this, she could not face her old home. The dread of old Sarah Timms' poisonous tongue infecting other cottagers was at the root of the matter, for Sarah's mischief-making had been one factor in driving the unruly spirit in Lottie to rebellion, and had often misrepresented her even in her father's eyes. She was going to the Infirmary at Westover, she told Jonathan, some instinct like that of the homing pigeon having brought her back to South Wessex from the weary wilderness of London streets. But she would be grateful for a lift as far as he was going in that direction, and Jonathan took her up in his brawny arms and placed her gently enough on some sacks that were lying on the empty truck. Then the little donkeys plodded meekly on again, with a double burden of grief and pain.

Jonathan was not going further than the cottages in which Farthing-faced Joe lived and old Charley had his room, for here his road turned off to his own dwelling. Lottie insisted on getting down, and with a shrinking glance at the familiar home, slunk past it and on towards the "'Dragon."

"If old Charley had been at home I'd have asked him for a cup of tea," she said in a half-wandering tone. "But he's in the House, you say. P'r'aps I'll see him there!" and she laughed her ghastly laugh as she plodded on into the snow. The cottage where her father lived was dark, for the Farthing-face was kept busy with the snow these days and was not yet in from work. Jonathan glanced at it a minute doubtfully, and then with the familiar yell at his donkeys turned homeward, leaving Lottie to her further pilgrimage. He was not a woman to know

whether or no she had a chance of getting to her goal, and, indeed, his chief thought at the moment was that he had forgotten to tell her of the failure of Hoddington's, and to ask if it had made much stir in London. It had so taken possession of the mind of the little community in which he lived that their brains rarely dwelt on anything else for long.

"She must have heard of the bank smash," ruminated Jonathan. "Or if she had not, it would have been great news to her!"

But Lottie was not concerned with news, even such a local fireworks as Hoddington's failure had been. She was full of bitterness and sorrow, and the world to her was one of God's failures. Past the "'Dragon'" went that heavy, flapping figure, plodding almost indifferently through the shaft of light from its open door, and past the forge where Lillicrap worked quite as sturdily as of yore, but with no glow of independence in his honest heart; but when she came to the stretch of road that lay between her and Camp, Lottie began to think with despair of the miles on the other side of it before she reached Westover. Since the sun had set the darkness had come rapidly over the land, owing to some heavy snow clouds, and a few flakes were even now beginning to fall again. There were no lights on the road here, only a faint twinkle behind the blinds of the houses on the right which faced the unbroken snow fields on the left. Lottie's leaden feet dragged through the snow, and her breath came in short gasps. She stumbled and fell again by the roadside, lying there for a minute as if already dead. . . .

Miss Johns had been down to the Huts that afternoon, but had been let off duty earlier than usual

owing to the dangerous weather. The next shift had arrived punctually, and she had walked home with Miss Noble and left her at her own rooms. As she returned to Trevena, she was startled to see a woman stumble and fall in the road just outside her own gate.

The figure looked ungainly and supine, and Miss Johns was neither very tall nor very strong. She glanced frantically up and down the road for help, but there was nobody in sight this winter evening but herself, and the woman at her feet was making a horrible rasping sound in her throat like strangled sobs. Miss Johns had seen too many in her condition through a long experience of District Visiting not to know what it meant, quicker even than Jonathan, and she bent down to ask the sufferer what she could do for her. Then she caught sight of her face, and started back with the same cry as the donkey-man :

“ Lottie ! ”

“ What, Teacher ? ” said Lottie vaguely, looking up through the dusk with dim eyes and recognizing the same face that she had seen for many weeks at Sunday school, while she was still the long-legged child of a few years since. It was evident that her mind wandered, for she made an effort to rise and muttered : “ Cold ! damned cold ! Get back to the Waterloo Road—— ”

Three aspects of the case presented themselves to Miss Johns' mind in lightning succession and decided her next actions. The first was that both her maids were out, having been given a holiday this afternoon while she was at the Hut, and that therefore they could raise no objections until their return an hour or

so hence. The second was that Lottie was very ill, and that aid must be rendered at once. The third was the deciding factor. I should like to represent Bertha Johns as the perfect Christian, succouring the fallen and thinking of nothing but sweet Charity ; but the real and simple truth is that her inclination led her to take Lottie into her house for the sake of the Romance that she personified. Miss Johns remembered the last time she had seen this fallen figure after the sale-day in July, the expensively cheap clothes, the air of fast prosperity about the girl. And now she was hardly more than a bundle of rags by the wayside. But what experience must have lain between this and then ! She felt a little thrill of terrified interest at the peasant girl seduced by the wicked aristocrat, just as if she had seen it in melodrama or read it in a novel. The sordid side of the picture did not strike her, because she could not get out of the habit of thinking that those above her in social station were not ordinary beings. Some instinctive loyalty to an ideal had kept her from betraying who it was who had taken Lottie away from South Wessex, though she had championed Wise at his nameless expense. Sir Arthur Penndragon had at last joined up. in spite of the Exemption Badge, and was known to be training with a Yeomanry Corps somewhere else—rather creditably, it was thought at Camp Rise. No blame for Lottie's fall had ever been attached to his name, though considering the reputation of his house, it might well have been. Only Miss Johns and Lottie herself shared the secret, if the girl had not betrayed it. And to Miss Johns there was still the halo of romance about the heavy, red-haired young man who had seemed to inhabit

another world, despite his villainy—perhaps because of it.

She never quite knew how she succeeded in getting Lottie to her feet or up the little drive to Trevena. The girl was half fainting and leaned heavily upon her, but she did manage to guide her into the dining-room and on to the deep Chesterfield sofa. Then she administered brandy kept for emergencies, and poor Lottie looked up gratefully, with tears in her eyes for the first time.

“I never meant tu serve you like this, Teacher!” she said. “I meant tu go tu the House at Westover.”

“Never mind, Lottie,” said Miss Johns in the cheerful tone that most people use to the sick. “When you are better, we will get you there. But you could never have walked all that way in the snow!”

“I meant tu—unless I died by the roadway,” said Lottie gloomily. “And if you want tu turn me out, you’d better send for help, miss, or it’ll be tu late.”

She had fallen back into the old address to her superior, though not so many months ago she would have asserted that she was as good as she. Miss Johns did not answer directly. She laid her hand on the girl’s dark, coarse hair, from which she had removed the old velvet hat, and said gently: “It is very sad to see you like this, Lottie—the little girl I used to teach in Sunday school when I first came here!”

A strangled sob came from Lottie’s throat, and her breast began to heave. She flung her arm up over her eyes with a fine, unstudied gesture that made her seem like a child again, and began to cry in the unrestrained fashion of her upbringing.

"Oh, he treated me crool—real crool!" she sobbed, excitement overcoming her weariness and pain. "He's a proper bad 'un—and I trusted him so well!"

"Never mind—don't cry! there's a good girl!" said Miss Johns, alarmed at the storm she had raised. "Try to eat something, or that brandy will go to your head in your weak condition. You shall tell me all about it another time."

But Lottie had found someone to sympathize and confide in, and with a subtle instinct she knew that Miss Johns was sufficiently interested not to condemn all at once. She wanted to talk of her trouble, and in hurried half-whispers between her periods of pain she told the story of that flashy seven months in her life, and its too brief passion ending in cool abandonment and a sum of money sufficient to compensate her in the man's opinion. Lottie had spent the money in the desire to live in style, as she had fancied she was going to do all her life, and then had taken to drink for a while to drown the fear of becoming a mother. At last it had become a question of going on the streets or going into the Workhouse—and suddenly a revulsion had risen in the girl at the horror she saw before her, and her unborn child had been her good angel to make prostitution impossible. Lottie had turned her face to the West, to bear her child or to die if need be.

"For it's *his* child, after all!" she whispered at the close of that revealing half-hour. "I swear I never knew another man. And it'll be a Penndragon, though I've no ring to prove it!"

Then Miss Johns knew and recognized that there was a guilty secret between them, and a link that bound them together—the worship of the Snob for

another class, be it never so reprobate. It is probable that she would have forgiven even Eric Hoddington but that his iniquity had been so mean in its essentials. He had robbed the poor of homes and honest livelihood without consent on their part. Penn-dragon's, on the other hand, had been a young man's vice, condoned by the weakness and vanity of one girl.

"I am going to get you to bed, Lottie, and to send for a doctor!" she said, and surprised herself by her firmness. "I am not going to turn you out. Your poor little baby shall have a chance of its life, whatever we decide to do later on."

CHAPTER XVI

"I've seen the sun on the hill top, there,
Shine all as bright in a harlot's hair ;
I've known no midnight black as the morn
An innocent babe to earth was born."

JOHN VANCE CHENEY.

THE servants were furious. Miss Johns had supposed that she was mistress in her own house, and had not realized that she had allowed both Minnie and Florence to establish a kindly tyranny over her. It was really kindly, for if it made themselves the first consideration, it certainly made her the second, and they would have staunchly defended her from any encroachment on the part of outsiders, and even against herself. No doubt they thought that they were doing so on this occasion, for when they returned in time to get her supper and found her ministering to an outcast woman who she had brought into Trevena, they expressed themselves with great frankness that she had been "done," and that the girl had better be sent straight off to the Infirmary.

"Putting yourself out for such as her, miss !" said Minnie, virtuously indignant on her mistress's behalf. "And letting her mess up the visitors' room—why, a pallet bed's as good as she could expect. And

she's made muck enough as it is, with her dirty boots on the dining-room sofa ! ”

“ The poor girl is very ill, Minnie,” said Miss Johns gravely, a little shocked at her “ nice maid's ” mental attitude. “ I want you to go to the Vicarage for me, and ask Mr. Thornhill if you may telephone for the doctor at once.”

Then Minnie burst out. She was not going trapassing up to the Vicarage on such errands, for outcasts brought in to Trevena and covered with vermin and dirt, no doubt ! “ And me and Florence is not going to wait on her, so don't you think it, miss ! ” she said loudly, her face flushed with her own rudeness and excitement.

Miss Johns looked at her with quiet patience and compressed lips. “ Minnie, either you or I must go to the Vicarage at once and telephone for the doctor,” she said. “ Are you going to make me put on my hat again and go out ? ”

Minnie flounced and stormed, but she was inwardly conscious of an astonished acknowledgment that Miss Johns would not give way, and a sense that she was, after all, in her service—a position so little taken advantage of by her gentle mistress that she was in danger of forgetting it. It ended in her flouncing out of the house and banging the back door in a way that made Miss Johns jump and quiver for her patient, now lying white and almost rigid in the visitors' room at Trevena between clean sheets that smelt of lavender. Miss Johns had laid and lighted a fire herself, and the quiet room was warm and comfortable. Ah ! such a rest after the snow and the despair and the wicked hope of death in the road—death at least for the unborn thing that would have small chance for its

life unless aid came quickly. Miss Johns was not a midwife, but she had been in touch with birth, despite her old-fashioned modesty, through long association with the poor and their flagrant profligacy. She did what she could for Lottie, and sat down to wait and pray until the doctor should arrive.

What tale Minnie poured out at the Vicarage in her indignation is immaterial, but it had not, certainly, the effect she intended. The Vicar himself called up the panel doctor, and made such an efficient summons that he was able to turn to the waiting girl and say, "He is on the road now!" And Mrs. Thornhill went and borrowed from her Maternity Bag to send such things as were immediately necessary.

"Miss Johns can't be expected to have baby clothes, or to know what she wants," she said practically. "And we'd better send for the district nurse, Richard. It may be a long case and someone must sit up. Here, I know the number—I'll ring up."

"And tell your mistress, Minnie, that I shall come and see her, and will render her any assistance in my power," said the Vicar, with an approving smile that rendered Minnie still more infuriate. But he was a big, powerful man, with an impressive personality that had loomed over her from the pulpit Sunday after Sunday, and she found it impossible to offer him any impertinence.

"They're all gone mad about this tramp," she muttered to herself, as she almost ran back to Trevena, for there was no knowing what new folly Miss Johns might not have perpetrated in her absence. "Mr. Thornhill ought to know better, leading Miss Bertha on like this! Well, I shan't stay, unless the tramp is bundled out pretty quick."

Her thoughts lightened as it occurred to her that the doctor might, after all, be the saving clause. He had a motor, and what was easier than that he should take the tramp back with him then and there to West-over and deposit her in the Infirmary. She made her suggestion unblushingly to Miss Johns as soon as she reached home, and found it met with chill dignity.

"Was that Mr. Thornhill's message, Minnie?" said Miss Johns.

No, Minnie admitted that it was not. It was her own suggestion.

"I have not asked you for your advice," said Miss Johns. "What did Mr. Thornhill say?"

"He's sent the doctor, and he'll come to see you himself," said Minnie grudgingly. "He said he'd be very pleased to help. Well, *I* think the best way to help would be to get rid of the dirty tramp as soon as——"

"You can go back to the kitchen and attend to your work," said Miss Johns, with a voice and manner that Minnie had only heard once before when she lost her head about the dividing line between her duties and Florence's, and tried to dictate as to the routine of Trevena. "If I want you I will ring."

Minnie went, to vent her furious outpourings on Florence. It did not mend matters that the cook had discovered who the "tramp" really was, and that Miss Johns had deliberately succoured her on recognition.

"What! that girl Lottie Preece? A nice sort of person to put in the visitors' room, and you and me to wait on her, Flo! The daughter of an old man who goes about with the mud cart, and she gone on the streets herself! Trevena'll be a home for fallen

girls next, and us expected to clean up after them. I shan't stay."

"If you go I'll go too," said Florence, who was more apt to follow a lead than originate such an upheaval.

"We'll both give notice, and then see how she'll like it—left to her low-class pets and their babies!"

Both Minnie and Florence were very respectable, and came of decent working people. Minnie's father was a house decorator in a small way, and Florence was a working farmer's daughter. They had never been on terms of social equality with Farthing-faced Joe, and had disapproved of handsome Lottie with her defiant airs and brazen acceptance of any young man's attention. There is class and class. Minnie was kindly condescending to old Charley when he brought watercress or mushrooms to the door, and called him a civil old man who knew his place. But she held herself above the dwellers in the small stone cottages because her father owned a little house with a sign-board at the garden gate. On the other hand, her people knew the Lillicraps, and took tea at the smithy, for until the failure of Hoddington's Lillicrap had been regarded as a "warm" man, and able to buy his own house and forge. The loss of his hoarded savings had not detracted from his position. People knew now for certain that he had had the money, and indignation was hot against the bank for him. Perhaps Minnie had at one time had secret leanings towards Lillicrap's good-looking nephew, William Copleigh, the young gardener at the Warren who had been killed at the front; but their names had never been coupled together. It had not added to her liking for Lottie Preece that the young man had been sheepishly

attracted by the girl's flaunting beauty at one time, and it may have added to Minnie's sense of superiority since Lottie's downfall.

The servants at Trevena had to await an opportunity to give notice and overwhelm their mistress by a well-merited protest against her outrageous behaviour in asking their service for such as Lottie Preece. She was in the sick-room, and remained at her post until the doctor arrived, and even Minnie did not care to force herself into that sanctuary and make the sensation she intended. The nurse arrived almost as soon as the doctor, a capable, pleasant-faced woman, who took charge of the situation with the indifference of custom, and set about making such arrangements as she needed. Wedding-rings made very little difference to Nurse Else. Her business was to bring humanity into existence, whether legitimate or no. The doctor had already seen the patient, and there was a business-like consultation between them.

"Are you on the telephone?" he asked Miss Johns, turning to her with his watch in his hand.

"Unfortunately, no. But I could send to the Vicarage."

"You might have to knock them up in the middle of the night. However, I'll come back at eleven, and Nurse knows what to do."

"You don't think—it will be yet?" faltered Miss Johns, feeling horribly immodest in speaking so to a man, even if he were a doctor.

"I hope we shall get it over before the night is out," said the doctor evasively. "Did you say you found her fallen on the road? She has done her best to bring trouble on herself, in this weather; but she's a fine, healthy girl."

Then he went, his motor sliding smoothly over the snowy road, and leaving Lottie behind him to Minnie's righteous indignation. Miss Johns went down to see that Nurse Else had some supper and to eat some herself, but she did not ask her servants to carry a tray to the sick-room. She rang the dining-room bell, and told Minnie what she wanted, and then herself got out a clean tray-cloth (Miss Johns could not have dispensed with the tray-cloth to save her life), and arranged the simple meal and took it upstairs to the sick-room. Some instinct moved in Minnie to take it from her and do the accustomed duty herself, but her half-checked movement met with no recognition from Miss Johns, and she watched the quiet, middle-aged figure going carefully up the stairs with angry tears in her eyes.

"I'd wait on *her*!" she said to herself. "I never said as I would let her do that sort of thing herself."

When Miss Johns sat down to her own supper everything was laid as punctiliously as usual, from the centre-cloth to the highly-polished salt-cellars that had belonged to her grandfather, and that a curio hunter had been so anxious to buy on "poor father's" death. Miss Johns always felt an added satisfaction to think that they were still hers when she remembered this gentleman's offer. He had wanted the Sheffield candlesticks too, those candlesticks that Gilbert Wise had helped her to polish. Certainly the servants did keep her silver beautifully, they almost seemed to take a pride in it themselves. Then Minnie entered the room and stood near the door, her face still rather hot with the temper into which she had worked herself.

"Me and Florence both wish to give you notice, miss!" she said with a burst of spleen.

"Florence must give me notice herself, Minnie; I cannot take it from you," said Miss Johns, not showing any surprise or asking the reason. "But I can take yours. This is the third—you will leave me on this day month."

"But I wish to go at once!" panted Minnie, feeling herself balked of her great coup by Miss Johns' lack of consideration in not asking her reason for leaving. "I'm not going to submit to having to wait on a common prostitute!" Minnie had been learning of the cinemas of late, and rolled the word out with effect. She had not exactly grasped its meaning save that it referred to girls who had base-born children.

"Minnie!" said Miss Johns in a low, shocked tone. "Don't ever let me hear you speak so again. I am ashamed of you. You can leave to-morrow if you wish to, but you must understand that you will forfeit your wages, and that I shall give you no character." Miss Johns never used the new-fashioned term "reference." "As to waiting on poor Lottie, you have not been asked to do so. Leave the room, and kindly do not interrupt my supper again."

Minnie was already ashamed of herself and her outburst. It had sounded so fine when rehearsed to Florence in the kitchen, but rehearsals and performances are seldom reliable tests of each other. She did not appear again, and Florence came to clear away the supper. As soon as Miss Johns rose and left the table the young cook fidgeted with the silver she was removing and spoke in her turn.

"If you please, miss, I should like to give you notice." She did not wait to be snubbed like Minnie,

but added: "I understand that Minnie is leaving, and I should like to go where she does. We get on very well."

"It is as you please, Florence," said Miss Johns indifferently. She looked very weary, but there was not the least capitulation in her manner. "I think you are two very ungrateful and uncharitable girls, and I hope that some day you will be sorry—not only for the way you have treated me, but for your unkindness to poor Lottie Preece. You might either of you have been betrayed and deceived as she was if you had not had good homes and good mothers to look after and train you. Do you wish to leave at once, like Minnie, and forfeit wages and character, or do you stay your month?"

Florence was plainly staggered at the idea of Minnie's precipitancy, and inclined to stammer: "I don't want to put you to an inconvenience, miss. I can stay the month if it suits you."

"You can do just as you please," said Miss Johns coldly. "You know the conditions. But if you stay you will do as you are told, and not make difficulties. You can let me know to-morrow."

"Yes, miss." Florence was a little subdued and left the room sniffing. Miss Johns sighed a little, and put her hand to her forehead as if her head ached. Her two nice maids, that she had trained herself to all her dainty little ways, and who made her so comfortable! She was paying dearly for her championship of Lottie and its secret cause. But she could not retract now, and she saw also that the encounter between her and her servants was a necessary evil, since it forced her to assert herself. Really, Minnie was getting a little too much! She would not have

been able to eat her dinner as she pleased, soon, or to have her table-centre, she supposed, if Minnie had disapproved.

"Perhaps it is as well that she should go," thought Miss Johns, and two tears squeezed themselves out of her eyes and rolled down her tired face. She had been quite under the impression that her maids were attached to her. By and by she went to bed, having seen that nurse had all she wanted and that there was nothing else for her to do. Lottie lay in a kind of stupor between her waves of pain, her strong dark hair in startling contrast to her pinched white face. The hair looked so alive, and the face so dead! Long after she was in bed Miss Johns saw that face still, lying on the pillow, and it seemed an awful thing that such disasters could happen in the world—that human nature was too strong for moral law.

She could not sleep much, her room being next that of her protégé, and whenever she fell into a doze, it seemed to her that she was awakened by moaning that grew to a shriek, and started up in bed thinking she must go in and do something—anything—to ease the pain that was causing a fellow creature to cry out like that. But the nurse was there, and totally undisturbed. Miss Johns lay down again, praying that the child might be born quickly and that she might never, never be in a house with a confinement again. Would Lottie have shrieked like that in the Infirmary, and would anyone have taken notice? It seemed to her, as to millions of other watchers of the burden laid upon women, that it was monstrous that the man should have no such penalty to suffer. She was a gentle, tender soul, Bertha Johns, but she wished quite fiercely that she could inflict some equal physical

agony on Sir Arthur Penndragon and force upon him pang for pang. She did not want him to bear the humiliation that Lottie had, or even to go down into the blackness of despair at being deserted in the strange town where she had lived with him so fast and gaily for a time, though he had made her go through that also. No, it was the physical suffering, the shrieking agony, that Miss Johns longed to fasten on the man as well as the woman. Everything else seemed quite inadequate.

"And then we should have no more illegitimate children, for if men had to face the pangs of it, too, they would not even indulge their own passions," thought Miss Johns, putting her fingers in her ears at last to deaden those cries.

At midnight the doctor came again and seemed to stay some time. But there was no stir of fresh life in the next room, no new wailing cry. There seemed to be a heavy stillness, and Miss Johns grew frightened. She heard him depart again after a time, and, rising, went to the window to see the glimmer of his subdued lamps as the motor took him away. It was intensely cold, and the world was all white. The silence of the snow seemed to have struck the house, and she went back to bed shivering.

In the dawn she woke again to those unearthly cries. It was intolerable that women should have to bear this! No human being ought to endure it, and she remembered with despair that Primrose—poor little Primrose, no coarse, strong fibre like Lottie Preece!—must go through it. It was some comfort to remember that Primrose had no need to tramp in the snow for miles with her burden heavy on her and her mind distracted with trouble. All that money and

care could do to make such things bearable would be done for her.

"And I know that dear Gilbert will be all that is tender and kind!" she thought, and blushed quite nicely in the grey dawn, because she had not yet got reconciled to using Wise's Christian name. Somehow the thought of him comforted her. He had always been so gentle and considerate of anything feminine, and his unconventional ways had shown her little familiarities that came back to her now as a promise that Nature was not always savage in her methods, and that birth might be a cause for heroism, but not for torture.

She must have fallen asleep thinking of him, for she opened her eyes to find it broad daylight, and Minnie standing at her side with an early cup of tea on a tray and red eyes.

"I'm very sorry for what I said yesterday, miss," she began at once bluntly. "But I was that vexed I spoke out. I'd like to stay on, and so would Florence—but she'll tell you herself. I've been thinking of it all night."

"Very well, Minnie," said Miss Johns quietly. "But if you and Florence stay, you must understand, once for all, that I am mistress in my own house, and if I choose to order a thing it must be done. You need not wait on Lottie—Nurse Else and I can manage that. But you must do your regular work."

"Oh, but please, miss, I can't let you go toiling up and down stairs with those trays," protested the girl, with real kindness in her tone. "It was seeing you do it last night made me feel sorry. And I shouldn't like to look Mr. Wise in the face if you knocked yourself up."

"Mr. Wise!" said Miss Johns, staring at the half-conscious smile on Minnie's face.

"Yes, miss. He always took such care of you himself, and he told me once I was a fool if I ever left you for anything but marriage!"

Minnie wiped her eyes again—she was on the verge of sobs—but her lips were smiling in reminiscence. Miss Johns remembered her first misgivings with regard to Gilbert Wise and his effective eyes on her household. If she could have known it, he had more influence over her recalcitrant servants even than she had herself, and she had never felt more independent and courageous than she did since they had capitulated.

"I am sure Mr. Wise would have been sorry to hear that you had left me in a fit of temper, Minnie," she said gently.

"Yes, miss." Minnie took a gulp and swallowed her medicine bravely. "And I took Nurse some tea just now, and the baby's born. It's a boy."

Miss Johns sat up in bed with a gasp. A Penndragon had been born under her roof while she slept.

CHAPTER XVI

"Life is a game the soul can play
With fewer pieces than men say."

EDWARD ROLAND STILL.

"SHE is very ill," said Miss Johns under her breath to the nurse.

"She is very ill indeed," said Nurse Else gravely.

"But a woman cannot do what she did in her condition and not pay for it."

Miss Johns glanced towards the bed where Lottie lay, staring with her closed eyes into a dim land which held no such pain as she had endured in the last twenty-four hours. Her face was sharpened with her late trial, and dead white against the thick heavy hair, and it had the effect of refining it out of knowledge. She was a beautiful woman lying there on her pillows, but not the coarse, good-looking girl of a few months since. No doubt she would revert to type if she lived, but Miss Johns, looking at her, wondered if she would always have had this finer beauty had her upbringing and surroundings been different.

"Will the—the baby—live?" she stammered. There was something almost guilty in her anxiety on this point.

Nurse Else shrugged her shoulders. "He has lived so far," she said. "That is all one can say. The marvel is that he ever came into the world alive. The mother must have a wonderful constitution; that is one good thing."

As if some drift of the low-toned conversation reached her, though she could not hear, Lottie's eyes came back from that far-away gaze, and she made a movement as if to raise herself. The nurse was at her side in an instant, and seemed to understand her by instinct.

"She wants to nurse the baby!" she whispered to Miss Johns with another shrug of amazement. "Isn't it wonderful what Nature does for them? I should have said she was half gone; but if anything can bring her back to life it will be the will to live for the sake of the child. If she's made up her mind to nurse it she may pull herself together."

Miss Johns' heart beat with a strange and secret excitement. Possibly she understood Lottie even better than the nurse.

"But if it dies——" she began with a quiver in her voice.

"It's the best chance for the child, too," said the nurse shortly.

Miss Johns was silent. She had a ghastly certainty in her mind that had it been any other case—one of illegitimacy only too familiar, alas! in her own District—she would have said solemnly that nobody could wish the poor little boy to live, though, of course, she did not wish him to die—an illogical creed that tried to reconcile morality with charity. But in this particular instance she knew that she did wish the nameless baby to live, and that he possessed that

secret interest and fascination for her born of his unlucky origin.

He was a very delicate child at first—a puling, wretched atom of humanity who seemed to get no good of his existence. Yet he hung on from hour to hour and day to day, hardly expected to live, and only kept alive, it seemed, by the intense desire of his mother that he should do so. Lottie rallied as neither nurse nor doctor had thought she could, the strong peasant stock from which she came standing her in good stead. She must have given her stamina to her son, Miss Johns thought, to enable him to survive, for survive he did. It was thought advisable to christen him as soon as possible, however, and Mr. Thornhill himself came down to Trevena and baptized the baby in the room where Lottie still lay in bed, her face half shamed and half sullen before the Vicar. Mr. Thornhill was impressive in his surplice, and his big, booming voice sounded solemn as he went through the brief service, Miss Johns and the nurse standing as godmothers. The child was called Arthur by his mother's wish. Miss Johns trembled a little at the betrayal she fancied in the choice, but that mythical soldier with whom Lottie had walked out in West-over, and who had lured her away, might just as well have been Arthur as Lady Penndragon's son. Neither Nurse Else nor the Vicar remarked on it. He spoke a few grave but encouraging words to the young mother, according to his office, and then turned to Miss Johns and held out his hand to her heartily.

"As to you, my dear lady, what can one say but that you are the Good Samaritan, and his commendation is for ever recorded in Divine words. I am sure that poor Lottie will thank you all her life, not only

for the material help you have given her, but for that charity which helps to confirm our faith in God. I thank you for her, and I thank you for myself. You have set us a true and womanly example of courage and love to your neighbour, and 'inasmuch as ye did it to the least of these,' we know to Whom you have really held a helping hand ! ”

The Vicar was speaking in his pulpit manner, but he really meant what he said. He thought it due to Miss Johns to let both Lottie and the nurse hear of his approval, and all the time he was speaking he was shaking the poor lady by the hand, so that she had no chance to get away or to parry his eulogies. But had he denounced her as a hypocrite and an encourager of vice Miss Johns could not have felt more humiliated. In the agony of her tender conscience she felt that she had not acted as the Good Samaritan, nor deserved Mr. Thornhill's booming praise. She dared not search her mind for the real motive that led to the impulse to take Lottie into her house, and she stood wretched and tongue-tied until the Vicar took his departure, thinking complacently—good man!—that Miss Johns was naturally embarrassed and overwhelmed by having her good deeds blazoned on the house-tops after being done in secret.

“ I shall never feel that I can look Mr. Thornhill in the face again ! ” thought poor Miss Johns, with a guilty glance at her “ god-son.” “ How beautifully he spoke, and how little I deserved it ! ”

It troubled her innocent mind often, poor soul, during the weeks that Lottie remained at Trevena. She progressed very slowly towards a state in which she could look after herself and her baby sufficiently to go to some cottage home. It had been decided to

send her down to her grandmother's for a time at West Bridge, pending other arrangements. The old woman was bedridden, and dependent on her neighbours; but if Lottie were to undertake the duty of seeing to her in return for a roof over her head, and look after the ailing baby too, she must recover some of her stolid strength. The ominous shortage of food was just beginning to reach even into country districts, whose population had hardly realized it as yet, and the weather remained intensely cold up to the end of April, all of which factors tended to put off the date of her removal. Miss Johns was not in a hurry to get rid of her, despite the expense and trouble and upset in her small house.

"I should miss the baby!" she said tremulously, rocking the nameless little creature in her empty arms.

Curiously enough, neither Minnie nor Florence were in a hurry to lose the baby, either. They would never be reconciled to Lottie, but they had succumbed to her child, though he could only have possessed that mysterious attraction to feminine eyes, being puny and wailing. Yet Minnie would carry him out in the garden as soon as milder weather cheered the end of April, and call him a "saucy boy!" which the poor child was certainly not, and Florence uncomplainingly washed his innumerable garments, though she had made it a *sine qua non* that no washing should be done at home where she took service. Sometimes when Miss Johns happened to be alone with Lottie for a few minutes they would talk breathlessly of him in whispers and gloat over the downy orange head. There was little doubt that the boy would be red-haired.

"Isn't he getting like *him*!" said Lottie, looking at

the small peevish face that bore no earthly likeness to anything but an ugly doll. "Look at his hair coming so thick, and his dark eyes, miss!"

"But yours are just as dark, Lottie!" said Miss Johns, pulling away a tickling fold of flannel with a touch that would not have hurt a butterfly's wing.

"He's going to be a real Penndragon, anyway!"

Then it was that Miss Johns' conscience pricked her most, and she felt the Vicar's loud praise as coals of fire on her head. In the last days of April Lottie was removed to her grandmother's, and Trevena seemed very silent without the sound of one fretful little wail; but Miss Johns could not resist the attraction of the Penndragon who had been born under her roof, and made more journeys down to West Bridge than anyone knew save old Charley, who had thankfully gone back to his watercresses when the frost let him out of the House again. The softer air of the valley seemed to suit the baby better than Camp Rise, for he grew healthier and sounder as the Spring advanced, though no one could have called him a beautiful child—not such a child as Lottie ought to have had by Arthur Penndragon, who Miss Johns had fitly described as "a fine-looking man!" whatever his disabilities. Lottie had jeopardized her own health and hampered her boy's future by one folly on another, and was reaping the conventional harvest of her sin.

"But it does seem a little hard that Sir Arthur should share none of the burden," thought Miss Johns. "I wonder if I ought to speak? I do not think Lottie ever will, even to force him to help her with the baby's support. It was unfortunate that she accepted that money when they parted—it was

like paying her off, and now that there is this dreadful scarcity of food it makes it so hard for the poor to live ! ”

It was the baby for whom she was really anxious, and for whom she made those unconfessed journeys down to West Bridge armed with the familiar basket. Even Lottie stoutly contested their right to take anything more from her benefactor, with the shortening of rations, and almost thrust away the bread that Miss Johns had denied herself to bring for her protégés.

“ You oughtn’t to do it, miss. You’ll starve yourself,” she said honestly. “ We’re allowed little enough as it is, and you can’t afford to share it out any further. We shall do very well—I’m getting milk from one of the farms near, and I can nurse him proper. I won’t need to wean him yet awhile.”

“ But you must think of yourself, Lottie. You want keeping up if you are to nourish the child properly. And you know ”—Miss Johns took refuge in a mean patriotism—“ the future of the Nation depends on the children, and particularly the boys ! ”

Lottie’s face altered oddly as she looked down at the little red head at her breast. “ I shall serve my turn, miss, as many women in England are doing to-day, bread or no bread,” she said quietly.

That was a hard Summer for the women who “ served their turn ” for the Nation, no less than the men in the trenches. Miss Johns came back from the West Bridge one afternoon in July with a heart-ache under the delaine blouse because of the sharpened outlines of Lottie’s face, and the falling away of her young frame. The Penndragons no less than the War were very much in her mind, and it seemed a coincidence

that as she toiled up the ascent from West Brook valley and emerged into the Camp Rise road, she had to step aside and wait for a carriage and a pair of fast bays that pranced past her like an equine whirlwind. Most people had given up their carriages, or drove a single horse, the shortage of fodder making horses a luxury no less than motors. But Miss Johns recognized the Penndragon liveries, and, looking up with startled eyes, saw that the occupant of the carriage was Lady Penndragon, and caught her face for an instant as she flashed by. A wicked, painted, fast face it was, with hair that should have been grey renewed to black under the rakish picture hat. Miss Johns calculated that she must be sixty—Sir Arthur was over thirty—and still scandalizing the County with her goings on!

“I am afraid she has not been a very wise wife and mother,” Miss Johns hesitated to think. “And perhaps she is partly responsible for his character. So much depends on a young man’s upbringing and the moral influence of a *good* home!”

Certainly Lady Penndragon had not looked like a moral influence or a good home either, and yet Miss Johns could not resist the tingle of interest that the sight of her had awakened, any more than she had resisted the secret glamour cast over Lottie’s base-born child. She was aware of it herself, and it troubled her conscience. With a vague yearning for confession and relief from the burden on her mind, she did not go straight home to Trevena, but stopped at Miss Hannah Noble’s unpretentious rooms before she reached her own gate.

Miss Noble was at home, in company with the landlady’s cat, but there were preparations for

departure even in her sitting-room, and she explained that she was going for her annual holiday.

"That will be nice for you," said Miss Johns, almost in the tone she might have said it to old Sarah in conjunction with a District Visitors' tea; but Miss Noble could not be suspected of anything very large in the way of a holiday. "Are you going far? Travelling is so difficult and expensive now!"

"Oh, no, only to some old friends, the other side of the county. You are waiting for the Wises, I suppose?"

"Yes—until Primrose is quite strong again. Gilbert insisted on my going to them, though I told him I was sure she would not want visitors, except her own relations. But you know he always says he is my nephew!" She laughed a little apologetically, and yet as if half pleased.

"I like Gilbert Wise—rogue's eyes and all," said Miss Noble. "He has the instinct of a child, and he always knows what he wants. I hope I shall be back before you go, and I shall come and help you to pack up and look at all your pretty things."

"Oh, not so very many!" said Miss Johns deprecatingly. "But I do like to be nice when I visit, and I confess I save my best things a little for that. I have such a charming dressing-jacket—but I bought it in a sale, quite cheap. Of course, I should not do such a thing this year, in the present dreadful stress, and the people actually wanting food!"

She glanced almost timidly at Miss Noble to excuse herself before she was incriminated. It was impossible to know what Miss Noble thought because of her penthouse brows; but her eyes seemed to see a good deal beneath them.

"You must be sure to take that with you!" she said seriously. "It will be just the thing for the hot weather, and I believe we are going to have a long Summer."

"And a bath-cap," Miss Johns was encouraged to add. "Perhaps it seems a little unlike me, but people in *good* houses always wear them going to the bath-room, I believe, and it is not at all young in style, you know—though very dainty!"

"You will certainly want a bath-cap, staying with Mr. and Mrs. Wise," said Miss Noble, bending over her packing. "What a good thing you bought it!"

And Miss Johns, justified, felt happier than she had done since the bath-cap and dressing-jacket came into her possession. Her heart warmed to Miss Noble, and she regretted that she was going away.

"I hope your holiday is not a very long one, though I am selfish to say that," she said. "But I shall miss you very much. Will you leave me your address, and I'll write to you when my own plans are settled."

Then for a moment Miss Noble hesitated, and Miss Johns was rather shocked at herself. Perhaps it was such a very humble holiday that she hardly liked to betray her destination. Miss Johns wished she had not asked; she had heard of gentlewomen who even had relations in *almshouses*. . . .

"I am going to Wessex Castle," said Miss Noble at last in a matter-of-fact tone. "I generally spend some weeks of the year there. I was governess to Lord Wessex's daughters, and they have always treated me like an old friend."

Miss Johns' feeling was not really so much shock as resentment. Why had Miss Noble concealed this

wonderful and exciting fact from everybody, when it was so easily advertised from the very first? "Of course, I know Lord and Lady Wessex very well—I was governess there," she could have said, and she would have been a mine of information in all things pertaining to the family. Wessex Castle had seemed so remote and set apart, that even gossip about it was not extensive. The Penndragons and the Templetons had been the highest layer of the society round Camp Rise, but the Wessex people were much higher still. So high were they that beyond reading of his being honoured by the King in various ways Miss Johns had known little or nothing about the Earl of Wessex. And here was Miss Noble in their very midst with a knowledge kept constantly up-to-date, since she admitted staying with the family every year—and she had said nothing!

"Wessex Castle!" said Miss Johns somewhat faintly. "Lord and Lady Wessex!—Oh, that will be very nice for you!"

"Yes, won't it?" said Miss Noble, busy about her packing even while she talked. "I am very fond of Lady Wessex in particular. I have known her since she was quite a young woman."

"Wasn't she his second wife?" Miss Johns recovered herself to ask.

"Yes, that was the cause of our friendship. He is many years older than she, and his two girls were not so much younger than Lady Wessex. They were rather a handful—high-spirited girls who resented a young step-mother—and she thinks that I helped her in a difficult situation." Miss Noble was speaking a shade faster than usual, as if almost embarrassed—and yet Miss Johns had the curious conviction that

the embarrassment was for herself rather than the speaker.

"You know them all quite intimately!" she said blankly.

"I was the governess, you see."

"But they treat you like one of the family!" said Miss Johns with a revelation.

"Oh, they are very kind people. They have quite simple ways." Miss Noble was almost in a hurry, which was unprecedented for her.

"And you have never said anything about it!"

That was the crux of the matter. Miss Johns knew, and Miss Noble knew, that every other woman in Camp Rise would have said a good deal about it. Why, even the Penndragons were very glad to know Lord and Lady Wessex as one landowner in the county is bound to know another—even the Templetons were pleased to have stayed at Wessex Castle occasionally. In South Wessex one could not get much higher than Wessex Castle. It is to be presumed that by the law of social evolution Lord and Lady Wessex were in their turn pleased to know those a grade higher than themselves; but Miss Johns' imagination grew dizzy at that point. She was only conscious to the depths of her soul of her own shortcomings and of Miss Hannah Noble's revelation of immunity from them.

"Do you know," she said, almost in a whisper, "that I came here to make a confession to you, and what you have just told me makes it seem far worse? I am going to make it in confidence, because it involves somebody else. You know about poor Lottie Preece's trouble?"

"That girl of old Farthing-face Joe's that you were so good to, and took into your house——"

"Oh, don't! don't!" said Miss Johns, shrinking as if from a blow. "I know who the man was who took her away—I saw them together in London. It was Sir Arthur Penndragon!"

For a minute the eyes under Miss Noble's penthouse brows were a shade curious in expression. They did not look as if the news were so startling as it should have been. All she said, however, was: "You have kept his secret well!"

"I am afraid even that was wrong!" said Miss Johns with a sigh. "I am afraid to analyse my own motive. But I did not know what to do——"

"I think you did quite rightly. I do not see that it could have done any good to create a scandal, since no amount of talking would have induced him to marry her. As a matter of fact, I have heard—but that does not matter," she broke off abruptly. "Tell me why your kindness to Lottie troubles you so."

"It was not kindness to Lottie—not entirely," Miss Johns confessed in the same low, shamed voice. "It was because I could not help feeling an interest in Sir Arthur's child, though it is illegitimate. I was even proud that a Penndragon should be born in my house. And when the Vicar came and praised me, oh! I thought I should have been scorched by his words, though he spoke *most* beautifully!"

"Yes, he does," said Miss Noble thoughtfully. "It seems to roll out of him like a good record on a gramophone, doesn't it? I often think he ought to have been a travelling agent for some manufacturing firm."

But Miss Johns was fortunately too absorbed in self-abasement to be shocked. "I felt that if he only knew my real motives he would speak to me in such

a very different way!" she said. "And since Lottie left me I have gone down to West Bridge to see her far more willingly than I do the sick people in my District, and we talk about the baby and what he might have inherited. I have been there to-day, and I felt somehow that I had gone from a degrading motive, though I took her some nourishment that I really think she ought to have. Miss Noble, I am—I am a Snob!"

Miss Johns' face had the distressed flush of middle-age as she made her supreme confession, not the pretty flush of youth, but the slow stain that only comes with real discomfort. Miss Noble's eyes were very kindly now, and even her closely shut lips were smiling.

"My dear soul, we are all of us snobs more or less, and a very good thing too!" she said. "It gives us something to hope for."

"*You* are not!" said Miss Johns quickly. "You never told anybody that you knew Lord and Lady Wessex. *I* should have done so!"

"I was only their governess. There is nothing very satisfactory about that. I am probably a snob over my intellectual attainments, for I find that I have given you all the impression that I am at least very well educated! Isn't that so?"

Was there a twinkle in those deeply-set and guarded eyes? Was it possible that old Hannah Noble, whom they had all patronized more or less—even Miss Johns in her gentle fashion—had had the laugh of them? It was rather discomfiting.

"Yes, I think everybody regards you as being very—clever!" she faltered, and really thought so for the first time

"Ah, well, I'm not really, you know—not by modern standards. But of course I live by my reputation. Dear, kind Miss Johns"—she took her guest's hand with a rare demonstration of appreciation—"don't trouble your head over the reason of your interest in people you think are above you. Be thankful that you have it. Probably they are far below, and not worth knowing—but it does not matter. What they represent to you is worth having, for it is the spice of life. Believe me, it is far safer and wiser to be a snob, than to look in vain for an ideal and to be disillusioned with all humanity."

And with an unexpected impulse the two women kissed each other, faded face to faded face.

* * * * *

A day or so later Miss Noble got out of the car at the entrance to Wessex Castle—rather stiffly, for she felt her rheumatism even in the Summer—and was nearly carried off her feet by the impetuous greeting of a lady who came out on to the very steps to greet her.

"My dear old Hannah!" said Lady Wessex, guiding her into the historic hall with an arm through hers. "How I have longed to see you! Isn't this nice? John is away for a few days, and I shall have you all to myself. I've such heaps to say I don't know where to begin. It's too bad of you to go and live over the other side of the county where I can hardly get at you, when you might have settled at our gates. However, I've got you now, and there's a chance of our having to use the town house in Westover this Autumn, so we shall be quite near. Did I tell you? No? It's these endless committees and War work. We are

both on so many that we simply must have a depot, and we may as well use our own property, mouldy though it is ! We have shut up most of this place, on account of the difficulty of keeping servants, and are only using a few rooms. But we shall stay on through the Summer on account of the tenants as much as anything. They hate our going away."

She had never ceased talking once as she led her guest through the gloom of the hall and into her own small drawing-room, where she helped her to take off her wraps. Tea was waiting, and only needed to have the boiling water poured into the squat silver tea-pot that Miss Noble remembered so well ; Lady Wessex had always liked to make tea for herself. But there were only some oatmeal cakes to eat, and a plate of hot biscuits.

" And how are Avice and Vivienne ? " Miss Noble asked when she could get a word in edgeways.

" As tiresome as usual ! " said Lady Wessex with a shrug. " Thank Heaven their husbands are responsible for them now. Oh, Hannah, what should I have done all through those miserable years, but for you ! I believe I should have given it up and run away."

" You have far too much pluck ! " said Miss Noble, looking with affectionate pride at the pretty face. Lady Wessex has kept her youth and her infantile beauty in spite of the tantrums of Lady Avice and Lady Vivienne. She is not an oppressively dignified countess until the need calls.

" Muriel," said Miss Noble thoughtfully, as she stirred her second cup of tea, " if you really do come into Westover in the Autumn, I believe I shall ask a favour of you."

"Heavens!" said Lady Wessex with ironical amazement. "I should be so flattered, Hannah, that I should think the skies were falling. It is just the thing that you never do, and John and I are nearly heart-broken because you will not let us pay one fraction of our debt to you. Ask me the half of my kingdom! What do you want me to do?"

"I only want permission to bring a middle-aged maiden lady to see you," said Miss Noble dryly. "In fact, I think I should like you to ask her to luncheon—it will be something to talk and think of all her life. But she is not rich, or smart, or eccentric, or notorious in any way. Nothing but a kind little lady of the middle classes—a nobody, in fact."

"Is that all?" said Lady Wessex wonderingly. "Why, I'll ask a cartload of middle-aged ladies with pleasure. I'm always doing it. You should see the people we have had here since the War, one way and another. Is she a native of Camp Rise?"

"She lives there, but she has aspirations that are exceedingly cramped in Camp Rise," said Miss Noble with a lurking humour. "And I think she wants new material to build on. Thank you, Muriel. If she comes to lunch with you I know it will give her a pleasure you cannot understand."

"I am sure that any change from a life at Camp Rise must be welcome," said Lady Wessex tolerantly. "It is a dreadful neighbourhood. You must all be bored to death."

"It has been full of sensation lately!"

"Hoddington's failure, do you mean? What a disgraceful thing that seems to have been! John cannot get over it. He has met Mr. Hoddington on local committees, and the son used to come here to

garden parties. Oh, Hannah! we were so sorry for the people—the small tenant farmers who lost all their savings on deposit accounts, and the cottagers who were going to buy their little homes. The distress reached all over the county—we had cases even here.”

“You would have been even more sorry in our neighbourhood,” said Miss Noble grimly. “The people think and feel nothing else still. Even the fear of famine has not put it out of their minds—or the elopement that came soon after the bank failed.”

“I meant to ask you about that. General Templeton’s daughter, wasn’t it? What *did* she do? There were the most extraordinary accounts of her having dressed up as a drummer-boy and followed some man from one battalion to another until he married her. And then that she had drugged the General and Lady Gracia and gone off with all the valuables she could carry to be married in London!”

“No, no!” Miss Noble began to laugh. “It is not quite so exciting. The worst of the case is that she fell in love with a man of whom nobody knew anything but that he had been through the ranks, and as her parents flatly refused to let her have him, she got out of her bedroom window one night and made off across the park and went up to London with him by the midnight train. It was all rather refreshing and adventurous.”

“That pale, demure child who was like an early-Victorian young lady! I should not have thought she had it in her. Was he *very* fascinating?”

“He had rogue’s eyes—you would have loved him. He has turned out to be somebody quite respectable—a family in the Midlands—and there is really nothing

to be said against the marriage—which seems to make matters worse.”

“Old Lady Gracia would never forgive that, after refusing to have him as a son-in-law!” said Lady Wessex shrewdly. “I must certainly see the run-aways when I come into Westover, if they are down in these parts. I am quite curious. I begin to think that Camp Rise is not so dull after all. Any more news?”

“Only a sordid story of a girl having an illegitimate child by a man in a different class of life to her own. The marvel to me is that he dared to do such a thing in his own neighbourhood; but I suppose he calculated on the girl being lost amongst thousands of others in London, or else the fact that he was himself likely to be sent out of the way by the War.”

“Was he a gentleman?” Lady Wessex looked a little startled.

“I don’t know if you call him a gentleman,” said Miss Noble deliberately. “It was not news to me when his name was revealed in confidence, because I had guessed it before. It was Sir Arthur Penndragon.”

“*That* man!”

“The curious part is that I heard quite by chance that since he left the neighbourhood he has renewed his attentions to one of the Warres—Warre of the Warren—who was visiting somewhere near his regiment. I suppose she will marry the brute. They used to be boy and girl sweethearts. But she has been looking very ill of late, as if she had some personal trouble, and I wondered if she had lost someone in the War—girls are secretive things, and her own mother might not know. No wonder people call it the tragic house of Warre!”

"They are all handsome, dark girls, with magnificent hair, are they not?" said Lady Wessex, as if trying to recall her County visiting list. "Something not quite nice about them, too."

"Temper. The girl he ruined was very much the same style as Brenda Warre—dark and striking and rather violent in her effects. He seems to like thunderstorms!"

"H'm! I should call it a natural reversion to the instincts of bad blood."

"But he is a Penndragon!" Miss Noble thought of the baby down at West Bridge, and the two poor, ludicrous women who secretly gloated over him as an unacknowledged scion of that notorious race.

Lady Wessex opened her eyes.

"A Penndragon?" she said contemptuously. "Why, it was an open scandal—everybody knew it. There was a handsome jobmaster, or something of that sort, in Leicestershire when she used to hunt. The only reason why old Sir Arthur didn't divorce her was that he was nearly senile, and he wanted an heir. The man is no more a Penndragon than you or I!"

THE END

